

TURNBUCKLE: A NOVELLA WITH
A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

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Preface

After more than a year's work, my novella with its introduction is now complete, a thing I once despaired of seeing come to pass. That it did is entirely the result of the ever-bountiful support, encouragement, and prodding on the part of my friends and well-wishers. I think Gordon Weaver, teacher, friend, advisor, mentor; Edward Walkiewicz and Paul Klemp, staunch defenders of the literary faith and boon companions besides; William H. Pixton, without whom the numerous grammatical oddities and bizarre constructions herein would probably have been unintentional; and my parents, William and Retha Hartman, without whose love and assistance this entire project would have been worse than useless. Thanks, too, to my friends Michael Briggs, R. K. Nandyal, Suzanne Goodwin, Jo Allen, and the hosts of other fine folks at the OSU English Department, without whose illimitable support during the gestation and birth of this work I would have sunk irrevocably into utter profligacy and despair. Selah.

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EXAMINING THE ELEPHANT: AN
OBLIQUE LOOK AT THE NOVELLA

There is in literature an indescribable entity, a poor relation of the traditional genres of literature, a chameleon of fiction. It is the novella, short novel, or novelette, and it is very like the elephant as described by the six blind men; everyone seems to detect some new feature of the form, but no one has an absolutely complete picture of the whole. Although Henry James, Vladimir Nabokov, and Joseph Conrad have all written extensively in this form, English-language studies of the novella have been rare as honest men.

Since a novella generally runs longer than a short story and shorter than a novel, some theorists have not surprisingly tried to define it by length. In his lively survey of scholarship, Marvin Felheim mentions Richard Ludwig and Marvin Perry's classic definition of a novella as a fictional work between 15,000 and 50,000 words long (22). He also draws on Irving Howe, however, to point out that a novella is much more dependent upon "a single line of action" which lends a "rhythm" to the story, but these are nebulous terms at best (22-3). The refreshing font of Mary Springer's vibrant study in the novella bears the 15,000 to 50,000 word limit along, but flows inevitably to the conclusion that this highly arbitrary length limit is important only insofar as it helps the author to "realize several distinct formal functions better than any other length," a factor which may "cause authors intuitively or consciously to choose that

length" (9). Neither author argues that length is a very important criterion to be applied to an anatomy of the novella, compared to the infinitely more subtle and complex artistic components of the whole. If I may be permitted a reprehensible cliché, the novella's unique flavor is not a matter of how long the author makes it; rather, it's how he makes it long.

With typical angst, the Germans have been pondering the solution to the novella question for well over a century. Kleist, Tiecke, and Goethe struggled with this chimerical creature, and although they brought excellent examples of the form forth from the fray, they found precious few universal insights into what makes up a Novelle. Further generations have studied the German masters to slightly better advantage. Thus, much of the material I present hereafter comes from these studies of the German Novella, but may be applied with equal benefit to any novella worthy of the name.

There are several features peculiar to the novella which are absolutely essential to the form. The foremost is absolute unity of theme centering upon one spectacular person, event, or thing which galvanizes the characters into action. Although other characteristics such as the typical "frame" of the nineteenth century and a distinctive narrative voice convention may also typically characterize the novella, this unity, Heyse's Falkon-theorie, is paramount. As Bennett admirably summarizes, Heyse's theory refers to the ninth tale of the fifth day in the Decamerone, in which one Federigo degli Alberti feeds his prized falcon to the woman he loves, lacking other fare, and so wins her heart and hand. Bennett explains that Heyse believes the falcon to be the central symbol or "silhouette" around which the entire story

revolves. Such a "silhouette" appears in every true novella and controls the entire work (13-19). Once such a symbol is formulated, the novella writer must endeavor to "so treat it as to exhaust all its potentialities, particularly on the psychological side . . . each fruitful theme is capable of really successful development only in one general direction," as Mitchell says in his retrospective look at Heyse's theories (95). Such a tightly-woven unity of theme and direction then assists the writer in "that fine sense of selection, which to Heyse's thinking is a sine qua non for any poet, but particularly for the writer of Novellen" (Mitchell, 98). This emphasis on absolutely fanatically-fashioned Gestaltung dominates all critical approaches to the novella.

Martin Swales certainly subscribes to the "singular event, unified direction" theory of the novella. He sees Heyse's Falkon-theories, however, not as mere symbolism, but also as a sign of Heyse's times, with the "silhouette" as "the expression of the extreme individualism of late nineteenth-century bourgeois society" (10). He then finds the central event or theme to be, after all, a phenomenological device; in its unfamiliarity, it provokes the creative response by its transmission to the artist's mind. Swales believes the raison d'etre of the novella to be the blend of "chance and fate as causing events that lend themselves to the artistic temperament" (27).

The attempt to portray an unusual event in a realistic setting, then, is the supreme challenge of the novella writer, the effort "to make an ordered statement of that which by definition resists the ordering intention," as Swales has it (27). The tension between the poetic and the prosaic, the subjective and objective universes brings

the creative genius of the best novella writers into the light of day, Swales avers (34-38). The unique pathos of Ivan Ilyich, the dark journey of Marlow, and the alien world of the man without a country would all fit Swales' criteria, in addition to the plethora of German examples he provides.

Swales also mentions the narrative "frame" common to the vast majority of nineteenth-century novellas as an important device for anchoring the discursive moment firmly in time and space (45-58); this particular principle seems to me a bit superfluous. Some stories, in my opinion, deserve a frame; others do not. His case for the frame is admirable, but as a universal convention, it simply will not do; while it certainly may apply to Kleist, Conrad, and James, the "frame" theory will not fit such modern practitioners as Mann, Kafka, and Nabokov.

Robert Roseler takes much the same approach as Swales. He also believes the sine qua non of a novella is "an incident which might or might not be of great import and which, even though it could conceivably take place, would yet appear strange and perhaps unique and which should emphasize a striking, central idea" (ix). Roseler is even more of a purist than Swales, who admits a wide range of variants in the structure of individual novellas, while Roseler has one further, and excessively restrictive, organizing principle for the novella: "No episodes or sub-plots, such as are to be found in a Roman, may disturb the complete unity of the plot" (xii). It seems to me, however, that such a devastating limitation is more appropriate for the short story than the novella; indeed, it is from that type of short-story restriction that the novella liberates the author. One cannot, of course, allow oneself the sweeping freedom of the novel's broad descriptive and

slowly-coursing discursive panoramas, but at the same time the writer is not bound to the total linear compactness of the short story, as Roseler suggests; if the latter were the case, many novellas would be short stories (as some may well deserve to be).

E. K. Bennett has performed the best dissection of the German Novella to date, sectioning it for the modern audience's edification with a clinical precision that enables his criteria to make the transition to the universal novella in fine form. Whether a novella takes the classic form exemplified by Goethe, ascends into the metaphysical realm of Kleist, or burns with the Romantic fire of Tiecke, it still adheres, as always, to a unifying principle of "One center of interest" (1). Bennett's constant emphasis falls on this unifying focus, usually a single concrete symbol, be it a falcon, a heart, or a pot of basil (15).

Bennett also touches upon the "frame story" aspect of the novella, but his interest here is not in the mechanical frame; rather, it is the teller of the tale he concentrates on, who "appears as a definite character within the narrative, a method of composition to which the term Rahmen (framework) technik is applied" (4). Thus, Bennett lets his emphasis fall, not upon the temporal shift of the traditional frame, but on the distinctive ordering presence of the frequent first-person narrators.

One contribution Bennett has made to the study of the novella is his brief and lucid explication of the old Anglo-germanic theme of fate in the novella: "by [the novella's] very insistence upon the one event which in order that it should be worth narrating, produces a great change in the life and fortunes of the hero, it tends at least to

express a certain view of life which may be described as fatalistic; and . . . its inner form at least is conditioned by the fact that it has to show that that which on the surface is chance, is in reality fate" (5-6). Thus, a murderous task confronts the novella writer; he must make what he ordains as fate appear to be chance, only to convince the reader that what appears to be chance is in reality fate. Ironic possibilities abound in this situation, which Swales also explores, albeit briefly; he has noted the Herculean challenge confronting the Novellisten by saying that "it is the measure of the discrepancy this undertaking seeks to overcome that form itself . . . is by definition ironic" (31).

John Ellis' excursion into the world of the novella represents the sort of thing a responsible scholar should avoid. He begins by reiterating the most widely-held beliefs about the novella in an exaggerated and distorted form, setting up a straw man of supposed academic pomposity and arrogance, which, however, he cannot for the life of him manage to topple; no credible source that I have found, for instance, suggests that character be subordinated to the singular event, resulting in, as Ellis complains, "little or no development of character" (3). Ellis argues that the voice of the narrative persona is the ultimate controlling principle of the novella, but his categorization of the broad varieties of voices he claims to discover is cloudy and severely disorganized; I can extract no single concrete and valid statement from Ellis to explain what features of the voice he considers germane to the form, so abstruse and undersupported are his theories. His arguments are often simplistic ("all character is shown in the response of people to situations" [6]) and his rhetoric deteriorates

into long semantic quibbles; the annoying quotation marks around words such as "realism" and "objective" proliferate beyond all control and reduce his arguments to an inchoate howling in the void, endlessly asserting that the novella is characterized by a limited narrative voice that "shows" what happens as it reacts to events and characters. There is nothing here that Wayne Booth is not light-years ahead of.

With the work of Howard Nemerov and Mary Springer, we at last begin to approach the first inkling of a final solution to the novella question. Nemerov has succinctly delivered a beautiful analysis of a few important features of the genre, while Springer has exhaustively researched and distilled the available material on the novella.

In addition to wonderful analyses of the short story and novel, proving once more than brevity is indeed the soul of wit, Nemerov proceeds to explore the novella, which, as a form, has had a surprisingly persistent attraction for great novelists. Their novellas, he says, have an "intensification of art . . . a closed and resonant style of composition suggestive of music or poetic drama . . . a single-minded coherence of argument suggestive of the demonstration of mathematics or chess" (376). Nemerov sees the compression of narrative in the novella (dealing as it does with an event of great significance too important for the short story but demanding a more ascetic and rigorous treatment than the novel permits) as producing "a corresponding intensification" of "design and not merely . . . plot" (375). The fate of the characters in a novella, he says, develops from their individual natures, to which the novella writer must pay strictest attention in order to strike "a very delicate balance between motive and circumstance" (386).

But Nemerov's most interesting discovery is that of a ubiquitous theme in many novellas. Drawing upon Jung's theories of universal archetypes that lie behind all fiction, Nemerov finds that the core of many novellas, including much of Conrad's work and my own present effort, is that "often, by the device of the double, the incubus as it were, [the protagonists'] sufferings and perceptions seem to invade them ambiguously from the world outside and the self within" (385). Here is Conrad's typical doppelganger and my own Avenging Angel. I am much indebted to Nemerov for this insight; the genre of the novella sorely needs a book-length treatment by this man.

Mary Doyle Springer's book has beaten Nemerov to the punch. After a short summation of the classical aspects of the novella as explored by Bennett et al., Springer divides novellas into five tentative categories: the plot of character, the degenerative tragedy, the satire, the example, and the apologue.

The serious plot of character, according to Springer, is one in which action reveals a character and shows him learning from his experiences, perhaps profiting thereby. It hinges upon a single revelation or event to which an isolated character reacts. The degenerative or pathetic tragedy is the relentless and relatively simple and quick deterioration of the central character into hopelessness and death. The compactness of the novella enables the author to fully explore the depth of the misery the character experiences without exhausting the reader (12).

The satire is a straightforward lampoon of a singular, isolated system, event, or thing, which is the single central focus or unifying "silhouette" that is inevitably the province of the novella. The

example is also a simple form, being a moral lesson or universal fable in which one can easily see his own experience (13). These two forms might, I think, be relegated to minor sub-genres of the novella.

Springer shines, though, in her explication of the apologue. She has borrowed the term from Sheldon Sacks in his Fiction and the Shape of Belief. The apologue form of the novella consists of the subtle use of the characters to prove a universal point; it is, for Springer, a kind of mega-analogy. Some identifying characteristics of this form help to show its nature. The first is its distance from the main character, achieved by making the character animalistic or killing him before the story opens, providing a kind of two-dimensional framework in which the story operates.

The apologue is also relatively plotless and depends heavily on the manipulation of time, sometimes by the use of the present tense, sometimes by the use of large gaps in time to dissociate the events from their temporal setting. Other characteristics include ritualistic, improbable effects, constant repetition of words and images, symbolic language, heavy authorial commentary, a relative lack of dialogue, and a highly stylized prose. The apologue, for Springer, is the modern equivalent of the morality play of yore, brought up to date by modern literary conventions and a creeping irony lacking in the old "everyman" plots (13-14, 18-51).

Springer's treatment of the apologue is, as she freely admits, by no means comprehensive; it is, though, irresistably fascinating. Her work is well worth consulting, but it is, as she says, more a call to action and a tentative stab at a megalithic subject than a definitive treatise.

Having thus wrestled with the daemonic form, I must now make my halting way toward an explanation of why in the world I wrote one. For one thing, my central, single focus for the work, the ring, was a limited platform for my characters to struggle in and revolve around. My protagonist's quest to define good and evil, to find a sense of belonging, and to grow up did not have the complexity of theme or convolution of event to merit novel-length treatment; on the other hand, it was too broad, too excursive in its theme and digressive in its struggle, to fit into a short story format. It is an archetypal retelling of the story of Jacob and the angel, with the blessing (in this instance the learning of forgiveness) paradoxically bestowed through rabid revenge and the futility thereof. It is at the same time (or so I wish) an elevation of the American culture to the status of, if not archetype, at least symbol. It is further a gentle (I hope) parody of Ernest Hemingway, whom I admire perhaps more than I should, with grace under pressure transmuted to keeping one's trunks up during a match or enduring a shower of cola and peanuts from irate fans.

I was eerily struck by the parallels between Nemerov's exploration of the "double" theme and my story, and by large portions of Springer's apologue theory which seemed to say exactly what I was trying to achieve. I chose the subject of professional wrestling because it is the closest thing the western world has to a travelling morality play, and my protagonist is on a quest, an archetypal enough motif; he finds an ethos for his life in a rejection of Zoroastrianism (or Manichean dualism, if you will). Ultimately, my modified apologue tries to show that a man takes and holds what best truths he may find, no matter how shabby they may seem, and lives by them. That's why I wrote the story;

that is why it takes the form that it does.

Thus, in the end, I find that my reasons for writing a novella are as amorphous to me as I fear the form is to those who would study it. I wrote in this form because it fit; that is the best explanation I can offer. I end, then, with a long quote from Bennett, who has summed up what I have intended here better than I could do so myself:

The Novelle is an epic form and as such deals with events rather than actions; it restricts itself to a single event (or situation or conflict), laying the stress primarily upon the event and showing the effects of this event upon a person or group of persons; by its concentration upon a single event it tends to present it as chance ('Zufall') and it is its function to reveal that what is apparently chance, and may appear as such to the person concerned, is in reality fate. Thus the attitude of mind to the universe which it may be said to represent is an irrationalistic one. It must present some aspect of life . . . which arouses interest by its strangeness, remoteness from everyday happenings, but at the same time its action must take place in the world of reality and not that of pure imagination . . . Characteristic of its construction is a certain turning point, at which the development of the narrative moves unexpectedly in a different direction from that which was anticipated, and arrives at a conclusion which surprises, but at the same time satisfies logically . . . the event being used as the acid which separates and reveals the various qualities in the person or persons under investigation. (18-19).

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"And Jacob was left alone;
and a man wrestled with him until
the breaking of the day."
--Genesis 24-26

ONE

All I remember from my early childhood is a series of long, gray walls and army green furniture. And oatmeal. I never eat oatmeal, and I hate kids. I think that's the only legacy St. Ignatius Loyola Orphanage left me.

Ed and Ida Mueller adopted me when I was almost six. It was really good of them, because most people want tiny babies or toddlers. They sure don't want pudgy, wheezing snotnoses like I was. But, like they used to say, at least they didn't have to housebreak me.

Ed was a huge fat man with gray-black hair and a wen on his nose. He was already getting old when they took me in, and he shrivelled up as the years went by. When I was in college, he reminded me of an old dried apple core with all the good stuff gone.

Ida was a skinny woman when they adopted me, with a real love for gaudy flower-print dresses. She did exactly the opposite of Ed; as time went by, she put on weight, adding pounds like souvenirs until she looked like a small truck.

They were good to me; I have no real complaints. Ed played baseball with me, and we were both fat and tired and lousy at the game together. He footed the bills when I got a lung infection frighteningly similar to TB (it cleared up in about three months). He gave me my name; I never knew what last name I was born with, and I don't care.

Ida cooked the food that kept me fat, and she kept the house clean. Ed worked nights at the Dow Chemical plant in Wyandotte, near

Detroit, and Ida would tell me stories after he went to work. We lived in a little postwar crackerbox on Helen Street in Lincoln Park, and the evening shadows fell across the floor in the late summertime like they were reaching for me. I needed those stories to keep going.

Ida would sit with her bright black birdseyes shining on me like dark suns and tell me about her brother Frank in Cincinnati, and how he fought his way through Germany, and how a sniper took his leg off right in the Bahnhofstrasse in Berlin, and how Frank pulled his service .45 and nailed that sniper right in the window where he was hiding, an incredible shot, and then crawled back to his squad to report the street clear before he collapsed. That particular story is probably why I own a .45 today--it's a kind of talisman. I never met Uncle Frank, and I heard he died insane.

I didn't play much with other kids. They teased me and called me "Fat, fat, water rat, sixteen bullets in his hat." I never figured out what that last part was about; I never had a hat. I was no good at tag because I was too slow, and I couldn't play hide-and-seek because the other kids would never seek me. I learned to read in first grade at Crowley Elementary school, and I spent a lot of my time reading Boy's Life and the Hardy Boys and making believe that I looked like the kids on the cover, little blond gods who never got hurt or teased.

Ed would come in in the afternoon before he went to work and see me quietly reading in the big crappy green chair I liked best, where the sun came in through the blue paisley curtains. He'd run his big blunt fingers across my dark brown crewcut and say, "Bookworm, hah? Keep it up, Jake, and you'll get ahead. You won't have to work for some dago bastard like Fenelli at the lungrot shop."

"Language, Ed," Ida would always say, but we both knew Ed's hatred for Dow Chemical and his foreman was a kind of legend to all who knew him. I don't think a day ever went by that he didn't curse them both copiously. He did it after he retired, too, long after Fenelli fell into a vat of acetone and died a miserable death.

"Hey, bookworm, let's go play ball a minute before I take off," he'd say on his good days, and scratch at the wen on his nose. And we'd go outside and snort and puff around the yard for twenty minutes, sweating in the afternoon heat, while Ida fixed iced tea for me and cracked a can of beer for him. Sometimes she looked out the window at us, or sat in a lawn chair on the concrete in front of the garage and looked at us with something in her eyes that might have been love or pain. Maybe it was just gas.

Then we'd drink, and he'd call me Babe Ruth and smile at Ida in her sagging, frayed lawn chair. He'd go off to work in his leprous purple Terraplane, a joke car, big sweat rings on his workshirt. Ida and I always went inside, and then it was time for stories about Frank or her father Wyman, a cop who fought the gangs in Chicago. As I got older, sometimes I would get a tirade about Khrushchev or Elvis Presley out of her, but the stories gradually got fewer and farther between and finally they petered out altogether.

It wasn't really a bad childhood until fear entered my life, fear in the form of Eddie Dupler. He transferred to Crowley when I was in the fifth grade. He was the first kid to wear dungarees to our school, and the first one to get kicked out for wearing them. And smoking cigarettes. And swearing. And a bunch of other stuff I don't remember. For some reason, Eddie Dupler took an instant dislike to me. He'd

run a hand through his black rat's nest hair when we were on the playground and pooch out his thick lower lip and say, "What the hell are you, anyway, you fat queerboy?" He slapped my face until I cried. He pulled my hair, and he pinched my fat rolls and my breasts bigger than a girl's until I told the playground monitor about him. After school that day, he beat the hell out of me. He chipped my front tooth and gave me a black eye.

Ida was speechless when I came home. I thought she'd be mad at me for getting a rip in the gray sweater she knitted me. But she put a cold compress on my eye and called Ed in, and then I told them what happened.

"I'll turn that boy in to the principal," Ida said, and my heart went cold. For crying out loud, hadn't I just gotten beat up for telling on him?

Ed said, "No, Mother, you let me handle this."

He went down the hall to my room and crooked a finger for me to follow him, and I went, keeping my eyes on the brown linoleum and wishing I could crawl into a crack in it. Ed went into my room where my model planes dangled on little bits of string from the ceiling. He sat down. My rickety bed groaned dangerously under his bulk.

"Jake," he said, "you're no powerhouse, son. Neither am I. Sometimes, when these turds like Dupler or Fenelli start to pick on you, you got to even up the odds a little. It's okay to play a little dirty when the other guy has the advantage on you." He lowered his voice so Ida couldn't catch what he was about to tell me. "You still got that bag of marbles I bought you when we took that vacation to Flint last year?"

I nodded, still ashamed of myself but interested.

"Give'em here."

I got the bag of marbles out of my scarred and dented dresser. They were the big, heavy opaque aggies that you don't see anymore. I had almost a hundred of them.

"Now gimme a sock."

I took a graying sweat sock out of the other top dresser drawer. He took it from me and poured the marbles from their cheap cellophane bag into the sock.

"What you do, see," he whispered, "is the next time you see this Dupler turd after school--don't do it on school property--when you see him, you pull this out of your pants and you wack his head. Do it from behind if you can, but sucker him into it if you have to. You know, beg him a little, see. Just keep hittin' on him 'til he's down. And then," and you could see he'd had this in mind for Fenelli for years, "then you kick him in the balls so he don't get up no more."

I took the sock and tucked it into my pants. Ed riffled my crew-cut and smiled. "I gotta go to work, slugger."

We went out into the hall. Ida looked at us anxiously, waiting to see if Ed had made things all right.

He grinned at her. "Hey, Ida, the Babe's okay, back from the grave and bigger than ever. We had a good man-to-man and I don't think he'll have no more trouble with this Dupler bird." He kissed her and went to grab his lunch from the kitchen. Ida looked at me uncertainly.

"Are you sure it's going to be all right, Jacob?" she asked.

"No problem, Mom," I said. "Dad fixed me up real good."

She smiled then. She always did when I called them Mom and Dad.

I smiled back.

I kept an eye on Eddie in class the next day. He smirked at me a couple of times and I had to swallow hard. But I was doing a slow boil at the same time, and I felt a kind of dark craziness boiling inside me like bees swarming and stinging inside my skin.

Eddie left me alone on the playground, which was just as well for both of us. But as I was walking the long blocks home, I heard running feet behind me, and there he was, just grinning.

"Hey, fat boy, where you goin'? You want some more of what I gave you yesterday, or what?" All with that big smile.

"Aw, c'mon, Eddie. I didn't do nothin' to you. Look, I wanna make up for yesterday, okay? I brought you something."

He smiled even bigger as I reached into my waistband. I looked at him in his grass-stained blue corduroy pants and his jeans jacket, and I knew that even if I had brought him a real present, he would have taken it and then beaten hell out of me anyway. It would have been the icing on the cake.

"Gimme," he said, grinning, grinning.

Just like Moe in the Three Stooges I said, "You got it," and I swung the sock out of my pants right into his teeth. He reeled back and his front teeth fell out on the sidewalk.

"Take it!" I screamed, and I hit him in the nose. Rich, dark blood squirted out onto his shirt front. Big, bad Eddie Dupler was crying and trying to get away.

I shoved my fat, sweating bulk into him and he went down. I took another couple of swipes at him. Once I connected with his right eye, figuring I would give him a shiner to match mine. I missed him on the

next one and heard some of the aggies in the sock crack on the sidewalk. Some other kids had gathered now, but they weren't chanting like they usually did at fights, "Fight, fight, a nigger and a white, Mueller is the nigger and Dupler is the white." No, they were real quiet. They wouldn't chant for me.

I cracked him on the crown of the head, and he stopped blubbering. He was real still and quiet. I was a little scared then, and some of the kids ran off. I stood up and glared around at the ones who were left. Then I turned to Dupler and said, "Here's your present, you shit," and I kicked him in the balls as hard as I could, which wasn't too hard. I was winded. I heard him gasp in a little air, and his legs shook like a dog on a cold morning. I knew he was still alive then, so some of the fright went away from me. I shoved my way through the silent ring of kids and went on home. None of them moved to help Dupler. They just stood there.

By the time I got home, I had tucked the sock back into my pants and wiped the sweat off my face. Ed and Ida were sitting in the living room when I got home, Ed reading the paper, Ida mending my sweater.

Ed looked up at me with a twinkle in his eye. "How was school, champ?"

"Just fine, Dad," I said, and I winked at him from the eye Ida couldn't see.

"That mean boy didn't bother you again, did he?" Ida asked.

"No, Mom. I had a real good talk with him. I think we understand each other now." Ed smiled at me like another kid would, not a dad.

The phone rang and Ed jumped up. "I'll get that," he said. We watched him go lightly into the kitchen and an icy hand clutched at my

bowels. I sank down nerveless in my big green chair. We heard his voice.

"Hello," he said, too brightly. "Yeah. No. I don't know. Naw, he was right here. Look, I know where he was. I don't know. I don't give a shit. Yeah? Well, I'm glad. He probably deserved it, and if you don't watch out, I'll give you some of the same, turdface!" The receiver rattled down. Ida and I looked at each other, then at Ed as he came back into the room.

"What in the world was that, Ed?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," he said. "Somebody with funny ideas. I put'em straight." His tone told her to drop it with no questions. "I'm calling in sick tonight. I got some sick days coming. Get dressed, Ida, we're going out for pizza."

She looked at him, wanting to question him and not daring to. She went off to get her coat. I followed Ed into the kitchen as he went to call Dow Chemical.

He turned to me and chucked me under the chin. "Get rid of the sock and the marbles at the pizza parlor, champ. Don't say nothing to nobody."

Oh, God, I killed him, I thought. "Is it bad?" I asked, with a trapped quaver in my voice.

Ed smiled like a Borneo cannibal. "Three teeth gone, a broken nose, and a little hospital visit," he whispered. "Home run, Babe." He chuckled, and I got enough of my spirits back to chuckle with him, and then laugh out loud with him, so that Ida looked at us like we were crazy when she came in with her coat on.

That night I ate more pizza than I ever had before, and I dumped

the sock and aggies in the bathroom trashcan. I kept thinking to myself, payback is sweet, payback is sweet, and nobody ever beat me up at school again.

TWO

I didn't catch too much flak for the thing with Eddie. The principal, a big burly man with a beard (an unusual thing in the fifties), called me in and asked me if I had anything to do with "the attack on Eddie Dupler." He knew damn well I did, and I knew he knew, but I played it dumb and said I didn't know nothing, I didn't do nothing, ask my dad. He called my folks, and Ed alibied me. Ida must have taken Ed's word that I wouldn't do such a thing, but she never did question me about it.

Eddie returned to class the next week with a beautiful black eye and swollen lips. They'd managed to replant two of his teeth, which surprised me--I didn't know such a thing was possible. His face was still puffy, and he wouldn't look at me. The other kids didn't make too much of it, either, but they quit teasing me, almost; sometimes one would yell, "Hey, fatso crazy!" from away down the block, maybe on a dare, and then run off before I could see who it was. But on the whole, my life really improved. Eddie transferred out in the middle of the sixth grade after the second grade teacher caught him pulling a little girl's dress up behind the gym, and I never heard of him again.

It was about this time that I discovered the pulps. For me, the pulps were the absolute best thing about the fifties. We had Tales from the Crypt, the Vault of Horror, Space Science Fiction, and my favorite, Fantastic Universe, with its bright four-color covers of rippling muscles on swordsmen and astronauts, and weird, alien

landscapes dripping with wonder and mystery and slime. This particular magazine featured a lot of the old Conan the Barbarian stories. I bought a lot of old copies at the Dix Used Books and Party Store on Dix Highway, pedalling off on my rusty bike with a few dimes to buy my fantasy fix for the week.

What I would have given to be Conan! Admired by men, desired by women, a fierce, lean barbarian burnt by a strange sun, with his own code of honor that transcended the weak sissies of civilization! I read ever Conan story I could get my hands on again and again. At school, my work took a nosedive because I drew pictures of Conan and his enemies and girlfriends instead of listening to the teacher. They were pretty poor drawings, I have to admit--I'm no artist--but I enjoyed it no end. Sometimes I would call on Conan when I played baseball with Ed, who was getting slower and slower at it, and really knock the ball out of the park--right across the fence and into old Mrs. MacAnally's yard. Then I had to climb across the fence and get it without Mrs. MacAnally seeing me and hobbling out to tell me to get back into my own damn yard.

I thought a lot about that code of honor thing. Ed was not above speeding, cheating on his taxes, and sometimes bringing home some small tools from work to fix the old Terraplane, by now a decrepit wreck. But he was an honorable man, in his own way. He saw to it that Ida and I never went wanting, and he always told people exactly what he thought of them, no matter what kind of trouble it caused him. Ida was a very moral woman, in her way, and believed in law and authority, but I never had the same awe and respect for her views as I did for Ed's.

What would my code of honor be, then? I decided that I would

never betray a friend, never oppress the weak, and never take advantage of a woman's honor (whatever that was or may be) under false pretenses. This was a joke, really. I had no friends, there were few people weaker than me, and I didn't know how to begin to take advantage of a woman's honor, no matter how much I may have wanted to. It was a noble feeling to come up with these things, though. And Conan was a loner, too.

I also discovered rock and roll. This was in the days before the fag bands ruined it, remember, the days of Presley and Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee. I probably spent an eighth of Ed's take-home every month, all told, in the juke at the White Castle hamburger joint, cramming every dime I didn't spend on those tasty, greasy little burgers into the slot to spin those little Atco 45's, whole lotta shakin' goin' on. You ask me, there's never been a greater time than the fifties for bone-crunching, ball-busting, freewheeling rock and roll with all the stops out. Ed and Ida couldn't stand the stuff, called it race music, but I couldn't get enough. We didn't even have a hi-fi at the house, but we did have an ancient Philco radio, and late at night, after Ed and Ida went to bed, I could pull in the doo-wop programs from Detroit and sometimes, when conditions were just right, Chicago. I would listen to Danny and the Juniors and believe: Rock and Roll is here to Stay.

How I would like to have been like them, the Big Ones, the original rock and roll stars! Jerry Lee, caressing and beating the piano like a sadistic lover, walking across the keyboard with his toes! Little Richard, even, sweat flying as he strutted his stuff and practically raped his piano! And the biggest one of all, the wild man

from down south, Elvis the Pelvis his-own-damn-self, grinding his hips into the swooning faces of adoring teeny-boppers and bobby-soxers, making the girls swoon with his sultry, dangerous, down-home voice! They didn't need a bunch of glitter and crap in those days, let me tell you. They were high on raw power, on wayward youth, on the ripe and bulging passion of rock and roll itself! And when I heard them, when I saw them on some temporary friend's tiny blue-screen Zenith, I was right there with them in front of the thousands, the millions, feeding my own passion into the crowd and getting it back amplified a hundred times in an incestuous circle that took me up and out of my on little personality, made me the biggest thing since the H-bomb. I swear I never saw a sixties band that could match the early rockers, except maybe the Doors.

If you didn't live through the fifties, you couldn't understand the times or me, who lived through them, and the power and the joy of it. We were the biggest, baddest nation on the block, and a white man with a little money and a car had the whole world right there in front of him. I felt it, that power, through high school, too, from '60 to '64. I transferred from Crowley to Hoover Junior High in '58, and from Hoover to Huff High in '59. My old classmates from Crowley went with me, and they spread the word from the long-ago trouncing of Eddie Dupler--don't mess with him, he's crazy. I remember I cried the day I heard about Sputnik, and I cheered the day I heard about Telstar. Maybe I was fat and crazy, but I by God was a member of the strongest and bravest nation on earth, and I wasn't going to let anybody tell me anything different.

I played it cool through high school, kept my head down and drew

my Conan pictures, and didn't particularly distinguish myself. I confirmed my craziness one day when, in a go-to-hell mood, I recited the history of Hyperboria (I'd memorized it from my Conan stories) in my sophomore English class for that jerk, Mr. Bellows. He tried to have me suspended for that, but Ed just laughed when I told him about it.

"Hey, bookworm" he said, "maybe you better read your schoolbooks instead of them damn comic books you always got your nose in, huh?" I was deeply offended, as any teenager would be, and tried to explain the difference between pulps and comics to him. He just laughed again and cracked another beer. "I wish to God I had a hobby quiet as yours, comics or whatever," he said after a big gulp of Stroh's. He chuckled deep in his belly. "Damn bookworm," he laughed, and that was the end of it. I didn't get suspended.

I discovered beer when I was a freshman in high school. Ed had a friend who worked at the Stroh's plant who got him all his beer at a discount, almost half price. Ed told me when I was thirteen that I was "old enough to be thirsty and too young to worry about it," and he gave me my first beer while Ida was out shopping. It tasted good and it made me feel important. Ed laughed and kept giving it to me until I was good and truly drunk, laughing to myself and trying to follow what all he had to tell me, which I couldn't make out real clearly, but it seemed to be about the pain of being a man.

"While the old lady's out blowin' my dough on sweepstakes tickets and cold cuts and Sen-sen, I'm at home picklin' a bookworm," he roared at me. And we both laughed and had another beer. He made me go to my room before Ida got home so I could sleep it off. I drifted off to sleep dreaming of dressing like Conan and singing rock and roll. Great

balls of fire.

After that, Ed and I would get drunk almost every weekend, whenever Ida went to get the week's groceries. I looked forward to those weekends like forty-hours-a-week-on-the-line men do, waiting for Ida to leave and Ed to break me out a Stroh's. It helped me to forget that I was so scared of women I never even asked for a date, and how the coach just laughed like a hyena when I tried out for the football team.

Between the Conan stories and the beer and the rock and roll, I made it through high school, don't ask me how. It was a nightmare of isolation. The brainy outcasts shunned me because of my reputation for craziness and evil, and I'd always been on the outs with the normal kids. The white-soxers and machine-shop crew left me out because I didn't steal or cut class, so that pretty much covered the whole damn waterfront for me. On the day of my graduation, I ran along the line of graduating seniors filing out of the gym after the ceremony was over, giving in to a long-stifled urge and pinching the ass of every cute girl in the senior class. I got a lot of outraged squeals from the girls and a lot of laughs from the guys, and that damn Mr. Bellows yelled at me, "You'll get your degree held up for this, mister!" But nothing bad happened to me, and I still look back to that one triumph of mine with the fondest of memories, much as I look back on the defeat of Eddie Dupler. It was great.

I took my college boards that fall of '64 and just barely made it. My math scores were abysmal, but my knowledge of American history was up to snuff, and my English, despite the antagonism between me and Mr. Bellows, was almost exceptional. I've always laid that off to the swollen, high-romance style of the pulps I gorged on. I could turn on

the dewy-eyed bullshit and the elevated vocabulary when I wanted to and really crank it out, though I usually ended up sounding like Bulwer-Lytton on his bad days.

The little old ladies with the blue hair and the rhinestone horn-rims who seemed to run the English department at Wayne State were pretty impressed with that sort of stuff, and I thought about going into English during my first semester. I was officially "undeclared," and sometimes I feel like that semester was the only time in my life I was ever really free to pick and choose what I wanted to do, not lock-stepped into any of fate's paths.

I took all of the standard freshman core courses and made average grades. It was Intro Philosophy, though, that really fired my imagination. I enjoyed discussing Plato's cave, and I wrote a paper for Dr. Stanton Lee that applied the paradigm to modern life with a vengeance. Philosophy seemed to me to be a way to finally finding out why my early life had turned out the way it did and how to find a way to make it go better for me.

I declared a philosophy major my second semester and Ed nearly shit a blue brick. "What the hell is philosophy? What kind of damn job can you get in philosophy? I didn't send you to school to goof around, dammit, I sent you so you could learn something to get you a easy job!"

He calmed down a little when I told him I could teach philosophy, not even high school, but actually in college, and he was really interested when I explained to him with typical undergraduate condescension what tenure was.

"You mean, you don't have no supervisor, and you can't get fired?"

he asked.

"Well, unless you rape a student or kill somebody or something, that's about right. It's sort of a permanent job where you don't really work, like with the government," I said, wincing at the oversimplification and wondering if I could ever even get a Ph.D., let alone tenure.

"You know what I think, son?" asked Ida, surprising me because she usually didn't speak up during mano-a-mano talks between me and Ed.

"What's that, Mom?" I asked, hoping the tension was gone for a while.

"I think," she said, with a little smile at Ed, "that our book-worm is going to become a butterfly in some university somewhere."

"A moth is more like it," said Ed, and we all three laughed at his incredibly bad joke. "But if you get this tenure thing, Babe, I guess you won't get burned." And we all laughed harder while I thought to myself, ungrateful, how naive they both were, and loved and pitied them all in one minute. Now I know how Ida felt when she watched us play ball. Bush leaguers, all of us, in one way or another.

Well, then, there it went. History of Western Thought--Socrates, Play-dough, ach du lieber Augustine, DesCartes before DesHorse, Kant. Kant what, har har. Heidegger, Husserl, Camus, Sartre. Can't tell the players without a program, that's what. And Nietzsche. Nietzsche is pietzsche, felt-tipped by my sophomoric freshman hand above the urinal and, for all I know, still there at Wayne State. A shaky scrawl, done, naturally, with my left hand. You tell me, how can you do justice to even one of those guys in one semester's time? Hell, how can you read anything by one of them and understand it

between August and December? But old Stanton Lee, bless him, tried, and he always encouraged me to do the same. The old college try.

The only one of those guys I felt a constant and abiding interest in was Nietzsche. "That which does not kill me makes me stronger," I wrote on the inside cover of my spiral notebooks, and I meant it. I could be a superman, above the petty social concerns of women and weak morality that said die when my heart said kill. I always liked Wagner, too; my composition teacher told me once that a person had to be slightly insane to truly enjoy Wagner. So with Nietzsche. You have to be at least a little unbalanced to read anything the man wrote, anyway, and I read the big ones: Thus Spake Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil.

All in all, it was a good semester, the last good one for me. I made straight A's, believe it or not, and I even got a scholarship from the national philosophy honor society for the next semester. Even though the spectacle of a 250 pound asthmatic turning in a paper on "Will and Warfare: The Modern Superman" is pretty ridiculous by anybody's standards, Stanton Lee told me I was one of the best students he'd ever had. I believed him.

Ed and Ida were so pleased with my progress in school that they bought me a really nice present for Christmas--my own second-hand hi-fi, an old Silvertone. It was an ugly gray color and made out of some cheap vinyl crap, and the needle was worn away to almost nothing, but I loved it. They also gave me a scratched-up set of The Complete Beethoven, but the only ones I cared about were the Eroica Symphony and the last of the Ninth and, when I was drunk and feeling sorry for myself, Fur Elise. You can bet that every penny I didn't spend

on booze and food in those days went for the old Jerry Lee and Elvis 45's, and, once in a while, a Shirelles single. Phil Spector had started coming out with all those whining girly groups then, and I wasn't too impressed, but "Tonight You're Mine" and a few fantasies about the younger freshman girls got me through many lonely nights, believe me. I bought "Little Darlin'" by the Diamonds, too, and "The Great Pretender" by the Platters. I loved it.

I noticed something about myself at this time. I was big. Not just fat, but I stood six-one and had a big thick neck and was almost two feet across the shoulders. I hung out at a beer bar called Irish Mike's in the liquor-and-food ghetto bordering on a red light district not too far from the campus, and even though some of the blacks that came in there gave some of the other whites a hard time once in a while in those early civil-right days, they never bothered me. It was a really good feeling after a few Stroh's to know that I was big enough to take care of myself. For Nietzsche, that would have been my first step toward recognizing my independence.

Like I said, things were going all right until that spring semester began. That was when I met Nora in the student lounge outside my philosophy of Religion class. She was a chunky freshman with a face that was losing a bitter battle with acne.

She wanted to complain that day, and I was the one she picked to complain to. "Look at this," she wailed. "Math at 7:30 on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Intro Philosophy every other day at 7:30, and a Psych class at 8:30 every day! Just look at it!" I looked at it, all right. Hell. I looked at her long brown hair and her bulging breasts and wondered if she had acne all over.

"Maybe I can help you with that philosophy stuff," I said, and presto! A relationship was born. Women love that word, relationship. It's all covered with strings and gold and mortgages. But what the hell. I helped her, all right. I prepped her with all the answers for her freshman tests, I explained the stuff from Intro Phil so that even she could get it, and I wrote her major papers for her.

In between times, we devoured mountains of pizza and rivers of Pepsi. She loved that garbage as much as I did, and I'm sure Ed and Ida wondered why my money was running out so fast. We went to movies, too. Her favorites were the romances like Dr. Zhivago and comedies like What's New, Pussycat. I preferred war movies like Sands of Iwo Jima and horror stories like Psycho, my favorite. "Tonight You're Mine" became Our Song, although "Great Balls of Fire" would have suited me better.

Nora never did like any physical stuff. She kissed like Ida, a hard dry chicken peck that left me wondering if I'd been kissed at all, and when I tried to French kiss her she gagged and cried and I had to take her back to her dorm. She preferred knitted sweaters and knee-length scratchy wool dresses that never rode up to give me a glimpse of slip. She pushed my hands away from her goodies at the movies, and she seemed to wince when I draped a more-than-protective arm around her at the park or in the puke-green visiting room of her dorm, where we spent the evening watching "I Love Lucy" and "My Mother the Car" on the beat-up old TV when I was too broke for a movie.

My grades fell off; you know how it is when you think you're in love. I spent most of my spare time thinking about Nora or being with her, and in class I drew big hearts with our initials in them. It got

so bad, what with late work and missed assignments, that Stanton Lee, by that time my advisor, called me into his office for a conference.

His office was pretty plush, brown carpet and a big metal desk with the most important modern philosophers sitting unopened on top of it. The man wore penny loafers with his gray flannel suits. I can still see those brown shoes with bright new 1966 pennies stuck in the slots, propped up on his desk at an angle, as he tried to figure out what was wrong with me.

"I can't understand it, Jake," he said to me, lighting up the pipe I knew he didn't like, but affected for his image. "You've always been exceptional in your courses, but you're nosediving this semester. So what's wrong, my boy?" He was full of annoying phrases like that when he wanted to impress you.

"Well, sir, there's this girl. . . ." I began, but how could I tell him that after all these years of unrequited lust, I'd finally found a likely candidate for all the fantasies I'd saved up.

"I see, Jacob," he cut me off. "A girl. Believe me, my boy, I know how it is." He had brown hair, going fast, that he wore moderately long, and a pair of those thick black-framed glasses that were supposed to give him an air of learning, like the pipe. I wondered if he needed them at all to see. "A girl. I see. But Jacob, surely you can handle a girl and these second-year courses at the same time, can't you? You've got a good mind, my boy, you can really make something of yourself in philosophy. I've never had a student who picked up on the basic ideas, the facts behind the fluff, as quickly as you do. Is she, "and here he lowered his voice and looked at me hard, "in trouble?"

I look back on that and laugh; at the time, it made me mad. "Just academically," I said. "I have to help her a lot."

He got a look in his eyes then, and if I'd been as smart as he thought I was, I would have recognized it. But I thought it was contempt.

"Surely you can see, though, Jacob, that your own work is more important? Being helpful is good, but what about yourself? As Nietzsche would have said, my boy, if he'd had the time, the will to power is only real if it concerns your own affairs."

I got up. "I'm not your boy," I said, "and this is my own affair."

He looked sad. Poor old Stanton Lee. "Well, Jake, it's your business. I'd hate to lose you here, but if you don't straighten up, you'll never make it. I hope you can see that."

I looked at him icily, defending, as I thought, the love I shared with Nora. "Is that all?" I asked through my teeth.

Stanton Lee looked up from his ridiculous penny loafers to me. "Yes," he said in a heavy voice, "I suppose it is." His voice followed me out of the office. "You're making a mistake, Jacob!" But I never looked back.

Nora was proud of me when I told her how I stood up for our relationship. She kissed me and hugged me and said that no one else, not even her daddy, had the guts to stand up to his main advisor for the girl he loved. We went out for pizza with tons of mushrooms and pepperoni and salty anchovies and watery Pepsi with too much ice at Gunnelli's Italian.

That spring had to be one of the worst I've ever had in my life.

One thing about me is that I never lie; so when Ed and Ida asked me how my grades turned out that June, I told them. F's and D's across the board. That was the closest Ed ever came to belting me.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing, kid? I didn't shell out the bucks for you to jerk around all year!" he yelled.

"You didn't shell out much with that scholarship I got last term!" I yelled back from my slump in the old green chair. He got up off the old flower-print couch and balled up his fist at that, but I was up almost as fast with my own fists ready.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Babe?" he asked, and he looked old and tired and sat down again. But all I was thinking: bigger, I'm bigger than him!

"Look," I said, "I can make it up next semester." They just looked at me from the couch, Ed like that old man he was becoming (and my God, how thin he was already getting!) and Ida, wattles on her throat, tears in her eyes. "I can make it up," I said again, but there was uncertainty in my voice, and Ed just looked confused, while Ida started to sob. I didn't know what to do. Nora's face floated in front of me, minus the acne, and I saw Ida crying and Ed shaking his head, and I had to get out of there. I bolted through the front door and ran down the block shaking and rolling like almost 270 pounds of Jello to the pay phone on the corner by the service station.

I stood with the newspapers and empty cups and cigarette butts in the battered phone booth and dug a quarter out of my pocket, a '64 quarter I wish I still had because they were really silver then and I called Nora at her folks' place in Livonia. I bet Livonia's long distance from Lincoln Park now.

Nora answered, and that was good, because I don't think I could have talked to her parents, not even long enough to ask for her. I told her what happened at home. I'd figured out a way to make it all better. I was a snail just out of its shell, soft and mushy. I needed a place go.

"Will you marry me, Nora?" I asked in my young lust and love. "Will you run away with me and make a new life somewhere? You and me together. We'll show'em all. Hollywood. South America. Diamond mines. Go with me, Nora. I need you."

"Jake," she said back to me over those miles of phone wire, "you're too wound up. Take it easy for a while. I like you, sure. You're a sweet guy. But don't take things farther than they really are. We have to think about stuff like this for a while. Can we just be friends for now? Can we just do that?"

Fat damn chance. I slammed the receiver back down so hard it cracked through the middle and hung there broken. I felt like punching my flabby fist through the glass of the booth and scaring the hell out of the stupid people on the sidewalk. Let's just be friends. Nowadays it's, "I'm just not into sex anymore." I'd been had. I'd been used. At least, that's how I saw it then. Can you really blame me?

First there came this feeling like maybe she meant it and everything would be okay in time and we could work all of it out and have a happy ending. Then I knew it wasn't so. Logic wouldn't let me believe it. I knew it was the end. I wanted to crawl up in my own little shell, shrivel up into a dried-out teenage husk and blow off on the sooty wind to be forgotten forever.

And hot on the mind-track of that came the hellhound of sweet

revenge, a great dirty friendly animal with glowing green eyes that told me to buy the biggest hairiest gun I could find and pump every round of it right into her face. Friends? Kiss my ass. I'd see her in hell first. I was crazy with it all, with failure and rejection and hormones and fat.

I called her every name I could, called her a pimply hairy-legged bad-smelling slut, got some of that hate and grief out of me. Just when I'd think sanity was going to come back to me, a new wash of pain and self-loathing would swamp my brain again. And the worst thing of all was that I knew everybody else had seen what a fool I was making of myself, everybody but me.

I have no clear recollection of what happened after that. I believe I walked around the streets of Lincoln Park, and I remember foggy scenes of beer in Gregory Park and trying to thumb a ride on the E-Way out beyond the fence behind Helen Street. I must have found my way home, because I woke up in my own bed before dawn the next morning. I packed the old Army rucksack Ed had given me when I was kid with some clothes and books (Nietzsche, of course). I took my high school class ring from Huff. I took a twenty dollar bill from the nose of my Fokker triplane on the ceiling. That was my emergency money. For some weird magical reason I wished I'd saved some of the aggies I'd hit Eddie Dupler with to put in the bag, but they were long gone. I went quietly to the kitchen and stuffed some canned food and beans in to the sack, and, in the dark mid-morning hours before Ida got up for her coffee, I left home.

THREE

You could get a sleeping room in Wyandotte in those days for two dollars a day. I made it there hitching and I got settled into a room that had roaches the size of my thumb and a peeling wallpaper print that reminded me of the couch fabric at home. I slept on an old piece of foam that served as a mattress with the rucksack for a pillow, and I ate the canned stuff cold the first week.

I got a job at GM's pickling plant there in Wyandotte that week. This was in the mid-sixties, remember, before the Japs made all the little shoe-box cars everybody drives these days. GM hired anybody without a police record back then. I worked on the pickle vat, grabbing the sixty-pound car door frames out of the acid in the pickle vat after the crane arm dumped them. The acid sealed the metal in some way I still don't understand and helped to keep it from corroding. I had to grab those door frames in my thick black rubber gloves and mount them on the hook that took them to the next man in the line, who checked them and sprayed off any residue from the acid. It was a filthy, miserable job that left me with holes in my clothes and little scars on my face and hands (the rubber gloves got eaten through sometimes) that I still have today. It paid, though.

I had to pay off my rent and get some food with my first check. My second check went for rent, some food, and a .45 automatic at Lucky Pawn in downtown Wyandotte. This was before the '68 gun law drove the price of guns to the moon. You could pick up a .45 for under fifty

dollars, and I did. Now they go for over four hundred.

That .45 meant a lot to me. First and foremost, it meant I wouldn't have to worry about every little night-noise I heard out in the hall of the crappy brownstone my sleeping room was in. Second, it brought back memories of Uncle Frank and the Kraut sniper and all, and it helped give me back the confidence Nora took away from me. I heard the .45 was invented for killing army horses and mules so the enemy wouldn't get them, and I knew it packed a wallop. The greasy little guy at Lucky Pawn gave me fifty shells for it, and I bought a spare magazine so I could switch every few weeks. If you don't, the spring may take a set, and you'll get a feed failure. I carried it everywhere, even to work, tucked into the waistband in back of my jeans.

Work was a real eye-opener for me. It took most of my limited powers of concentration in those days just to get the damn door frame out of the vat and sling it on the hook before the next one came down the line. I thought I'd die during my first month there. Those things were heavy, let me tell you, and I wasn't used to doing that sort of thing. After a while, the door frames all started to blur together, until I didn't have to do the work consciously anymore. Now I hear they have job rotation, so you don't end up doing the same thing over and over like that for months on end. I guess I did all right, though. I never got a yellow reprimand slip in my file.

Work also helped me to forget about Ed and Ida and Nora. I could slip into a sort of trance and just keep going for my whole eight-hour shift from four to midnight without remembering the stuff that had happened to me. At night, I slept with my .45 under my pillow after I got off shift, or, when I couldn't sleep, I took it to the old Red Hill

cemetery outside Wyandotte and kept the dead guys company. I was a little bit nuts, I guess, from disappointment, and I used to sit there in the dark, with all the people in Wyandotte gone off to bed or the night shift, with the cold white tombstones in the moonlight and my .45 to ward off the creepies. I used to calculate the ages on the tombstones with girls' names and wonder if the younger ones would like me if they knew me. I built whole little scenes of me in another time, being a trapper or a lumberjack, maybe, and the pretty girls sleeping cold under the marble alive and warm again to keep me company. It passed the time until I felt tired enough to sleep.

In all the time I worked at the pickling plant, I never called or visited Ed or Ida. I remembered the looks on their faces the night before I left, and although I got into the pay phone booths and started to dial home again and again, I never got up the nerve to go ahead and do it. I cried a lot.

After a while, when the work at the pickle plant was going pretty well, I started to take stock of myself. Who was I, anyway? Answer: A fat guy who spent too much time by himself and wasted his pocket change in the juke at the Fly Inn tavern downtown, listening to songs no one else remembered or cared about. I went down to the recruiting office to try enlisting in the Marines, but it was like trying out for football all over again. When they saw my fat, sweating bulk and listened to my lungs, and when they heard about my health history (I told you I was honest), they classified me 4-F, and I never got in. But I tried, though, unlike a lot of my generation who just ran off when the country needed them.

I wanted to do something with myself. The worst part of my fat was melting away on the pickle line, and I was really aware of myself. I don't know how to say it any other way; I was aware of my body for the first time, not just parts of it. When I got out of that crappy sleeping room and into nicer apartment on River Street, I started saving my money. Pretty soon, I had enough for a one-year membership in the Wyandotte Men's Club gym.

Nowadays, all you've got is some lousy Nautilus center to work out in, with fags reclining on the little padded benches and pretending they're getting in shape. In '67, though, we had a real gym, with the rowing machine and the weights and the punching bags. All right, maybe the machines needed a little oil, maybe the bags were duct-taped to hold them together, maybe the raised platform for the boxers to spar in sagged in the middle, but there were men there in those days, muscles rippling under their pale Michigan skin, a gleam in their eyes that said, "Don't mess with me, Jack, I may be a flyweight but I'm a contender." It was there that I began to work on my leg muscles and the upper back area that the pickle line didn't touch. I could get in a good hour or two before the afternoon shift started.

I went at it hard. The more I worked, the less I thought about what I had been and the more about what I was becoming. Some of those old Conan fantasies must have been working on me then. I put my work clothes and my .45 in one of those ten-cent lockers they used to have out in the lobby, with the gun wrapped up in my clothes like a swaddled babe, and I worked out in dungarees and an old sleeveless tee. I rowed like Caesar's slaves never did and punched the bag hard enough to knock the duct tape loose when I pretended it was Nora's face instead of dumb

leather there. But I never spoke to any of the other guys. They all seemed to know one another, and after I'd been in the Wyandotte Men's Club a while, they all nodded at me, but they belonged together and I belonged apart. To joke and laugh with the other men and play grab-ass in the shower and whatnot would have been as wrong for me as ballet would have been for LBJ. It wasn't my style.

So I worked out in the afternoon, and I worked on the stinking pickle line where the acid fumes made my nose hair fall out, and I slept in my one-bedroom walkup for the better part of a year. I carried my .45 and named it "Freddy" because that was a good name for a best friend, and I was pretty screwed up for most of '67. I listened to oldies on the AM stations after I bought a cheap transistor, and I cheered our every victory in Vietnam. I listened to it less as the Beatles, first of the fag bands, started to creep in more and more, and my music died away. I probably would have gone on like that until I died if it weren't for the Irish sweepstakes. It's funny how little things change your life forever.

John Gruziak, the man down the line from me at work, sold Irish sweepstakes tickets during the two ten-minute breaks we got, and I was fool enough to buy them. For one thing, they reminded me of Ida, who bought them constantly (she was always a sucker for any lottery or contest), and for another, I had visions of going home to Ed and Ida a rich man and buying us a house in Grand Rapids. The tickets only cost a quarter each back then, but I put more and more money into them. After I won fifty dollars one week and got the letter all the way from Ireland with the check in it, I went apeshit. I started buying forty and fifty dollars' worth at a time from Gruziak (and you tell me why a

bohunk with a nose that could open soup cans sold tickets for the old sod, I don't know). I bought him out each week and he smiled at me through his big black handlebar moustache and said, "That's right, Jake, you gonna be a millionaire you keep this up," and went back to spraying off the acid in the stinking cinderblock building that housed the pickle line.

I found out later that gambling can be like booze or the dope the hippies used to take; it hooks you. I gave up my beer on weekends and went hungry many times to play the sweepstakes, and I never won again. Those pretty little green-blue-and-red tickets never did enable me to buy that house in Grand Rapids for Ed and Ida. But I kept believing.

I lost weight, what with working out and eating lots of beans so I could afford the sweepstakes. I used to accidentally fart sometimes when I was working out, and I always left the gym immediately with my face deep red if any of the other guys noticed me when I did it. Beans are protein, though, and I was really getting into shape. I weighed 225, and my muscles were starting to show when I looked at myself in the foggy shower room mirror.

One week, I decided to give up eating altogether. If I saved the three bucks I spent on beans for the week, I could buy twelve more tickets and win that much sooner, right? At work, it seemed like the door frames got lighter and lighter, and Gruziak started to look at me like I was crazy. He even told me that week to save some of my money on tickets and feed myself, because I didn't bring my usual cinnamon roll from Baumgartner's deli to work that day. Big black hollows grew under my eyes, and my hands started to shake on the machines at the gym.

I remember I went to work that Saturday afternoon, my only day off, and I couldn't work the paddle arms on the rowing machine. A couple of dumbbells slipped out of my hands when I was doing my warm-ups for the weights, and I had to go and sit down on one of the brown naugahyde benches. That was when this big blond guy came over and sat down next to me.

"Hey buddy," he said. "Are you okay?" It was nice to be called buddy, after Babe and kid and my boy and all. Buddy at least meant a little acceptance.

I found I couldn't say anything to him. My brain and tongue seemed stuck, frozen up. After a little pause, he went on.

"I seen you working out before, but these last couple of times you ain't looked too good. Are you sick?"

I unfroze long enough to say, "Hungry," and saying the word turned loose what I'd been trying to ignore since I gave up the beans. There was a raging, howling demon in my gut crying to be fed. I felt like falling over.

"C'mere a minute," the big guy said, and I floated up, weightless, drifting into the lobby with him. He went to one of the lockers and stuck his cheap brass key in it. The peeling white paint on the composition board walls and the ratty broadcloth chairs in the lobby were swimming around me.

He took an enormous thermos out of his locker and uncapped it. He handed it to me. "Drink it all, I got plenty," he said.

I drank. I thought it might be beer or whiskey, but it was a thick orange-flavored drink with little granules in it. Though I drank gallons of it in the days to come, the taste never came close to the

sweet rush of that first batch.

"That's Joe Weider protein in orange juice," he said. "I practically live on it. It's good for your muscles and your blood."

"Thanks," I said, with deep gratitude in my voice. My eyes cleared up a little and I saw patches of gray in the guy's blond hair. He had little lines and scars on his face, and there were stretch marks, faint but noticeable, on his bulging biceps and meaty thighs. This was the first time I met Happy Jack Mulligan, the man who introduced me to the world of pro wrestling.

"Young guy like you ought to take care of himself," he said. "You're pretty well-built, but your training'll be shot to shit if you don't eat regular. Are you broke or something?" He said it all looking at me like I always wanted Ed to do, concerned and fatherly but like an equal, too.

I looked at the floor. "Yeah, I am. I blew my money on the Irish sweepstakes."

The big guy looked at his watch. It was getting late in the afternoon. He considered something for a minute, then said, "I'm Happy Jack Mulligan. Ever heard of me?"

"No," I said.

"I'm a professional wrestler. I work Cobo Arena mostly for the Big Time Wrestling show on [channel 50.] I work the Mid-South circuit in the winter sometimes. Tell you what, pardner, how'd you like to make fifty bucks tonight?"

"What did you have in mind?" I asked.

He looked at me, sizing me up. "We got a new guy coming to Cobo tonight, a badguy from the North Atlantic circuit. His name's Bruiser

Bates, and they want to tease the geeks--the audience--with him this week, so they'll put him up against some no-name. If nobody's on the card yet, I might could get you on. Hell, I'll even have'em bump whatever no-name's on and put you on the ticket. What do you say?"

"I don't know shit about wrestling," I said. "I've seen it once or twice on Saturday afternoon after Wild Kingdom, but I couldn't do that stuff."

He laughed. "Your first time is easy, pal. You just try to grab the guy and throw him on the ground. Naturally you can't really do it, see, but you ham it up. Then the guy pretends he belts you or body slams you on the tarp or something, and then he picks you up in a full nelson. It don't hurt, but you got to scream and wrinkle up your face like he's killing you. Just hang in there and scream for a minute, and then he'll throw you down and lay on you and that's it. You set and shake your head like you don't know what hit you, and then you go get your fifty bucks. To be a no-name, all you have to do is know how to scream and fall right. And I can show you how."

What did I have to lose? "Let's go," I said, and we went into the gym. Nobody was boxing on the raised platform, so for the next two hours I learned how to make a big noise with my arms when I fell, using that noise and arm motion to break my fall. I learned how to bounce off the ropes and how to twist myself up in them after a fake punch or drop kick. I learned how to look ferocious and stomp around, and how to change to screaming pleading pain in an instant. The other few guys really enjoyed watching us, abandoning the rowing machines and weights and bags to grin while Happy Jack showed me how to pretend blindness from an eye gouge or how to puff up my cheeks and bulge my eyes in a

sleeper hold. After a while, we both began to show off for the guys, Happy Jack appearing to pound me senseless and me bouncing right back, full of fight, only to get slammed down again. Then he pinned me (and my God he was heavy!) and checked my head-shake and bewilderment, the follow-through for defeat. After that, we had to leave for Cobo.

Happy Jack had a nice '66 Mercury, night-blue with a yellow custom stripe and a white vinyl interior. It was a smooth ride, but I was a little nervous to be going into Detroit. This was October, right after the '67 riots, and the city wasn't a healthy place for a white guy then. I had changed into my work clothes over a spare pair of Happy Jack's trunks, which were a little too big for me, and I had the .45 cocked and locked in the waistband at the back, so my faded denim jacket would cover it. Happy Jack must have noticed me looking nervous, because he told me not to worry about the coloreds (he was one of the 1st people I knew to use that word), that cool weather and extra cops at night calmed them down.

We made it into the big multistory parking garage on time, and soon I was in the dressing area, a string of little cubicles in the bowels of Cobo Hall. There I met Bear Martense, an old beefy guy with a red wino nose, who promoted and arranged the matches for Big Time. Happy Jack convinced him that I needed a break, and so I found myself substituted on that night's ticket for the match with Bruiser Bates. I had to wait for my call while I watched the other wrestlers get ready to go for their matches.

Here was every celebrity fantasy I'd ever had come to life. The Crusher was there that night, a big wild-eyed platinum blond in a red satin gown, carrying a twelve-pound sledgehammer that served him as a

ring prop. Haystacks Calhoun, almost 400 pounds in his custom overalls, ready to fight barefoot like a berserk hillbilly, rolled up and down the hall, slapping backs, trading jokes and insults with the goodguys and badguys. Sweet Daddy Siki was making a cameo appearance that night to fight some no-name, and he strutted in his hot-pink tights like a primal ballerina. It was an event I never forgot, that first night, and it took away every desire I had to waste money or time on the sweepstakes. I was hooked on a new habit.

Bear Martense came into my cubicle shortly before I was to go on. "Hey kid," he said, "we gotta change your name. Mueller just don't make it. Happy Jack says to go with some Irish name. What the hell was the name of that crazy Mick with the machine gun back in the Depression? McGurn. That's it. Jake McGurn. Sound tough enough to you, champ?"

I would have given all I had to get into this game. My name was nothing. "Sure," I said. "Sounds swell to me."

Bear Martense swiped at his big red nose with the back of his liver-spotted hand. "Okay, kiddo, from now on you're Jake McGurn. Good luck." He left with a little stagger.

I balled up my work clothes and my jacket and put them on the wooden bench sticking out from the wall in my cubicle. I was worried that someone might steal my .45, but I hung it by the trigger guard on a bent nail sticking out underneath the bench so no one could see it.

I was sitting there, sweating a little in the heat of the cubicle, waiting to be called, when a big bald head with two popping blue eyes stuck itself through my curtain.

"You McGurn?" this weird face growled. It was smooth and white,

like the marbling on a good steak before you broil it. There was a little bloody nick on top of the bald head, and I thought it might be from shaving. But I didn't laugh.

"I'm Bruiser Bates," the head said. He swept the curtain aside and I saw that while he was big, his muscle tone wasn't quite as good as mine. All of him that I could see was as hairless as his head. He wore purple trunks with gold lame trim and Bruiser picked out in sequins above the crotch.

I stuck out my hand, and to my surprise, he took it. I expected him to spit at me or something, but the pros save all that for the ring.

"I'm gonna slam you twice tonight," he said. "It's my trademark, a kick'em-when-they're-down thing. So you just lay there after the first slam, and come to a little when I pick you up for the next one, so you can break your fall without tipping off the geeks. And take it easy during your bit. I pulled a groin muscle in Wheeling last week, and I'm still sore. So look good, but don't get too feisty."

"No problem," I said. "I'm new at this and I probably won't be much of a match for you."

He chuckled, and I wondered how a man so ugly could look so kindly at the same time. "Don't worry about that, kid. I'll make you look good. You seem like an okay guy."

Then he bawled down the hall, "Hey, guys, I got a virgin!" There was a chorus of catcalls and a shower of boots, newspapers, and jockstraps rained down on my cubicle. My face was red, let me tell you, but I had a sheepish grin all the same. Bruiser Bates grinned back at me and said, "See you in the squared circle, sonny. And watch out

for," and his voice hit a lower pitch as he shouted out, "that steel turnbuckle!"

Voices up and down the hall took up the cry, "That steel turnbuckle!" I recognized Sweet Daddy's voice when he yelled, "Dat infamous steel turnbuckle!" Everyone laughed. There's a little steel T-connector at the core of the turnbuckle, but the rest is soft foam covered with non-abrading vinyl. Having your head beaten into it is like having someone push your face into a slippery pillow. I didn't know that then, but I laughed with the others so I wouldn't look stupid.

Soon they called me. I walked out of the dressing area and up the stairs to Cobo Arena, the biggest auditorium I had ever seen. There were hundreds--maybe thousands--of people there as I came out of the south vomitorium. My legs went rubber with stage fright but I tried to convert it into a swagger. Still, I was too slow, so Lord Layton, the ring announcer, had to say, "Making his way to the ring, at 210 pounds, a newcomer to the Big Time circuit, Jake McGurn!" There was some scattered applause and a few boos. I got to the ropes and swung myself in like Happy Jack showed me, working the ropes with my arms after I got in and bouncing around to show the crowd I was full of piss and vinegar. Actually, I did have to piss, and I was conscious of a vague fear that Happy Jack's trunks might slip off me during the bout.

Then came a murmur from the crowd and a lot of boos. Lord Layton started up again in his posh voice, pretending to read the specs from a sheet in his hand. But he knew them by heart. "And making his way to the ring, at 260 pounds, another newcomer to Big Time--from Waxahache, Texas, the eighth wonder of the world, Bruiser Bates!" The crowd went

nuts with boos and hissing and incoherent screaming. My head, light from not eating, rang like a church bell.

Bruiser Bates had come out of the north vomitorium, using another set of stairs from the dressing area, and he looked much, much bigger to me than he did in my cubicle. This man is going to pulverize me, I thought, and my scrotum shrivelled up with fear. He did a one-hand jump into the ring as Lord Layton made his dignified exit, the klieg lights hitting the Bruiser logo on those flashy trunks. Then he did the Big Stomp around his corner, making the tarp ring, while he glared at the booing crowd and shook his fist at them. I wondered if the people travelled a lot, or got the lowdown on who's good and who's dirty from the wrestling mags. Whatever it is, they sure knew who to boo and who to cheer.

Then came the bell, and I charged out to the middle of the ring to meet the Bruiser. I didn't give him much time to get prepared. Our referee, Bill Norman, was watching me out of the corner of his eye to see that I did things right and didn't take it too seriously. New guys made the refs nervous; with the old hands, they can just go blind, deaf, and dumb and let things take their course. Bill was a scrawny guy with red hair and a big adam's apple, and I could see it bobbing up and down as he wondered what I would do.

I grabbed the Bruiser around the waist and lifted him off the ground. My strength surprised me until I noticed he was helping me by pretending to lock his forearms around my neck and lifting himself onto me. I did a back fall and he pretended to smash his face into the tarp. The crowd cheered, and I felt really proud of myself. I picked myself out of the tangle and jumped on the Bruiser's back, twisting his

left arm up behind him, but not too hard. His lips writhed away from his teeth and he squinched his eyes shut while he pounded the tarp with his right hand. Bill Norman wandered over to ask him if he wanted to submit and forfeit the match. Bruiser shook his head no, screaming and flopping his legs behind me. I made exaggerated motions with my elbows to show the crowd how I was torturing him. They loved it, but all I could think about were those damn borrowed blue trunks that were slowly inching down my waist.

Then I felt the Bruiser's feet in his shiny combat boots on either side of my waist, and he gave a gentle tug. I hadn't practiced this move with Happy Jack, but I did a backward flip and lay stunned on the canvas. Instantly Bruiser Bates was on me with a choke hold. I bulged my cheeks and bugged my eyes. The boos were deafening, and those trunks were still creeping down toward my sweaty thighs.

Then the Bruiser put one hand on my throat and the other in the waistband of my trunks. I stood up while he pretended to raise me up off the ground. He had my trunks secured again, and I was grateful to him as he faked a mighty palm slap to my face. I staggered back, almost into Bill Norman, and then wandered around the ring with a dopey look of pain and confusion on my face. The Bruiser rushed in for the kill, because no-names aren't supposed to rally for a comeback. He lifted me up and tossed me onto the mat. I broke the fall with my arms, but I bruised my knee and lost my breath. I lay there for a minute while the Bruiser did a little dance around me and grinned at the screaming fans. Then he picked me up again and held me in the air long enough for me to pretend to come around and register horror when I saw my situation. I broke the second fall better and didn't move a

muscle while the bell rang and Layton called, "The winner, in five minutes and thirty seconds, Bruiser Bates!" The boos were unbelievably loud, and Bruiser Bates, deciding not to milk it, hopped out of the ring and waltzed down the aisle, taking a shower of coke and peanuts and ice from the fans.

I got up and did the headshake and bewilderment bit, and Bill Norman made a big show of helping me out of the ring. A few fans cheered me as I wandered toward the vomitorium, and one or two of them wished me better luck next time. And so my first bout in professional wrestling was over.

I took a whore-bath with liquid soap in the wash basin in the men's room back in the dressing area. This was before Cobo had showers. Then I went back to my cubicle and dressed, putting my .45 back under my waistband and my denim jacket over it. Now my head was really spinning and my limbs started to tremble. Bruiser Bates stuck his head through the curtain for a minute and gave me the thumbs-up, saying, "You did fine, McGurn, you're a natural. Good luck to you!" He left, probably to hit the bars before they closed.

After a while, Happy Jack came in to see me. "I heard you did okay, Jake. It's not so bad, is it?" He had just come from his bout and was wiping the sweat off with a dingy gray towel.

"No, it's pretty fun," I said. "Do you think they might let me come back again?"

Happy Jack looked wise. "They will for a while, pal, but you can only stay if you develop a character. No-names are a dime a dozen, but if you can make yourself a good character, you'll have a home. When I say good, I mean believable. You've gotta be either the cleanest

goodguy or the dirtiest badguy around. By the way, the badguys usually get paid a little more than the goodguys. They take lots of grief from the geeks, like you seen tonight."

"Will you show me some more tricks, Happy Jack?" I asked. My whole future hung on that question.

"Sure, pardner. No problem. but Jake," he looked at me seriously, "don't quit your day job just yet."

I got my fifty from Bear Martense and treated Happy Jack to a whole greasy shopping bag of barbecued ribs from some little shack of a restaurant he took me to, and I still had a little over thirty dollars left. When he dropped me off at my apartment that night, I said to myself, "Jake, Jake, you've found a home. Rock and roll is here to stay."

FOUR

I got my real education from Happy Jack. Every spare minute I had before work and on weekends I spent with him when he wasn't wrestling. We put in long hours on the weights and machines, we jogged blocks and blocks before it became a fad for college girls and wimpy men, and we wrestled on the creaky old raised platform in the Wyandotte Men's Club. I learned the hammerlock, the headlock, the toe hold, the crusher, the sleeper, and a host of others. Happy Jack taught me more of the aggressive moves, like the forearm smash and the boot stomp that goes with it to make a loud noise when you hit your opponent. I was still a no-name at Cobo, but Happy Jack promised me we could tag-team together when I got good enough. I was usually the cannon fodder for the badguys Big Time imported, and sometimes I got to grapple with the goodguys when they needed filler time on the card and some goodguy wanted to show the crowd what he could do.

Wrestling spoke to me like nothing else, not even philosophy, ever had. It was the ultimate rock-and-roll macho roadshow. Sure, most of the fans knew or at least suspected that most of it wasn't real, and a man feels silly when someone asks him what he does for a living and he has to say, "I wrestle." But the excitement! The lights! And you know, goodguy or badguy, that crowd is right there with you, feeling the body smashes or dealing them out. It's a magical feeling, almost a holy one.

Wrestling is almost religious in its own way. There's all the

ritual of getting into the ring, or going on camera to trade trash with another wrestler, and the costumes and robes and glitter briefs and regalia beat anything the pope gets to wear. And wrestling is like religion because the crowd wants the same thing--the triumph of good. They want to see the man in the white trunks, no matter how little or overpowered or even outnumbered he is, get up and give it right back to the badguy. And even if evil wins once in a while, you know that good is always going to come back in a Tag-Team Grudge Match and whip the hell out of it.

I talked about this with Happy Jack when we rested up for fifteen minutes or so before I had to leave for work. We swilled the Joe Weider juice and traded sissypunches on the arms and Happy Jack told me something I should have recognized myself. I was the philosopher, right?

"Jake, what's it going to be for you, goodguy or badguy? You thought about it?"

"Well, I'd rather be a goodguy like you, Jack," I said. "You get all the cheers and sympathy. And I heard they've been throwing cups of piss on the badguys lately. Security is supposed to bust geek ass for that, but they can never tell who really did it. Naw, the badguys got it bad, even if they do get more money."

Happy Jack was lacing up his shoes. His gray patches were touched up with a little Miss Clairol then, and his bright blond hair was slicked back from the shower.

"Y'know, pal, that's what everybody says. But I figure it this way. I get paid as good as the worst badguy, and I got the geeks with me, but I really believe it takes a braver guy to be bad. Look, if

there are no badguys, there are no goodguys, right?"

I nodded.

"If there are no goodguys, there's no game, right?"

Another nod.

"So if you really, truly love the game, and if you are a brave guy--if you got real guts--then you do something early on and dirty up your name, and then you give the game a point. Do you see what I'm saying?"

Sure I did. That, in a way, was what Nietzsche said all along. If I turned bad, I'd be a real individual, not just the arm of the crowd.

"I know it ain't easy, Jake, to get dumped on by the geeks. But hell, I heard some of these guys talk, and they like it. I mean, you figure it, maybe it ain't cheers and kisses, but the badguys get a hell of a lot more attention than goodguys do. When they trash us, they can scream and spit and get wild with the interviewer. But we've got to stand there and talk real calm about revenge and justice and all that, but we can't really trash'em back as good as they did us. And they get better costumes, too."

He squinted at me. "I dunno, Jake, but you better be thinking about it pretty soon. I signed us up as a tag team against Mike the Mangler and Sonny Boy Banks next weekend. It's time you made a character, one way or another. I think you done enough screaming and falling down."

A tag team match! I couldn't believe my ears. Finally, the real big time, and no more being called "a scrappy new grappler." I could have hugged Happy Jack.

He smiled at me and said, "I got an idea for this match I'll tell you about. If you wanna go bad, what we'll do is this. I'll announce you as a guy I been training, and you come on the interview with how grateful you are and all. Then, Mike the Mangler and Sonny Boy will dirty me up real good and put me out. You come in like the avenging angel. Mephistopolus--the phony Greek that manages the Mangler and Sonny Boy--is impressed. They hold up the match cause you win it illegal and they reschedule us again in two weeks. Then, when I'm cleaning up during the rematch, you turn on me and ruin me good. It comes out Mephistopolus has bought you for his stable, and it starts a feud between you and me--ungrateul serpents and all that."

He paused a second to make sure I got it. "So we fight a winner-leaves-town match," he went on. "You cheat me out of it, I get a vacation to Mid-South out of this freeze-ass town for the winter, and you get a character, a name, and you go into Mephistopolus' stable, which means Bear pays you on a salary instead of his nickle-and-dime shit. What do you think?"

"I dunno, Jack. I mean, if I did that, when you come back, would you still be my friend?"

"Sure, dummy, what did you expect? I'll always be your pal. But if you want to do this, watch yourself. I'll get you in the ring, and before you know it, you'll get rammed right into--"

We said it together. "That steel turnbuckle!" We broke up, and he sissypunched me on the arm. "Stick with me, pal, and you'll go far," he said. I left for work and he left for whatever he did in the evenings, booze and whores as far as I know.

That week at work went slower than a snail. Gruziak knew what I

did on weekends, and he wasn't too sore at me for giving up the sweepstakes to buy my own trunks and Joe Weider mix. I told him about the bout coming up while we were on our ten-minute break. He puffed a Lucky Strike and I tried to get the acid slime off my jeans with a rag.

His handlebar twitched in derision, that crazy moustache he thought made him a man. "Hey, Jake, that shit's all faked, ain't it? I mean, you don't really do that stuff in the ring, right? You'd be dead if you got pounded like that every week."

I looked him square in the eye. "John," I said, "it's a lot more real than you'll ever know." Which wasn't really a lie.

Finally the big day came. I met the Mangler, an ugly man with long wild black hair and a big gap between his two front teeth, and I met Sonny Boy Banks, a short, squat black guy who was built like a wall. He was one of the first black wrestlers to wear an afro, and the crowd hated him. Some of the blacks in the audience would cheer him, though.

I met Mephistopolus, too. He was a stocky man in his late thirties with dark sunglasses and a dyed white streak through his hair. He wore a big rhinestone ring on his pinky that looked like a real diamond on TV, and he always carried a long, crooked cane like a shepherd's staff for a ring prop. He dirtied many a goodguy with that cane. Actually, he came from some lousy neighborhood on the lower east side of Detroit, and his real name was Sam Cohn, but in the wonderful world of pro wrestling he was Mephistopolus, the Greek billionaire, out to ruin the world for his personal glory. When I first met him in early November of '67, he was just growing his famous goatee, the one Cody Earp forcibly shaved off him in '73.

All three of these guys were as friendly as could be with me and the other wrestlers, and we traded jokes and insults back and forth. Mephistopolus promised to introduce me to the Ape Man and Doctor Devastation, and the Mangler promised to introduce me to "that steel turnbuckle!" Happy Jack and I made the arrangements for the upcoming feud next week between us with Bear Martense, and before I knew it, it was time to go on.

That was the first televised match that I did, and I saw more things on the film than I remembered doing later. Big Time used to come on at noon back then, and Happy Jack and I watched the match together in the Fly Inn the next Saturday over beer and peanuts.

After the diddy-bop Big Time theme and the first few no-name matches, there we were. I saw myself and Happy Jack, both of us in matching blue trunks, jumping into the ring and doing the rope shake and shoulder rotations while Lord Layton announced us. It was a weird feeling, floating on the beer and seeing a three-inch me on the faded little Motorola over the bar. I guess Happy Jack was used to it.

Then there came the Mangler and Sonny boy, with Mephistopolus right behind them. The jeers of the crowd sounded tiny and unreal on the TV speaker; I remembered how loud they'd been in the ring. Before you know it, Sonny Boy and the Mangler waded right in, and Bill Norman was shaking his finger in vain as all four of us traded forearm smashes. Jackie Dougall was the commentator then, and he kept referring to me as "a bright young newcomer" and "Happy Jack Mulligan's pro-teggy." I laughed at that one, and the bartender turned the sound off. Jack and I were almost the only ones there, glued to the screen while the serious drinkers soaked up hard stuff in the dark corners.

Someone dropped a dime in the jukebox and "Happy Together" by the Turtles came on. Jack and I almost fell off the stools laughing while we watched the Mangler try to twist Jack's head off on the screen and the juke played, "I can't see me lovin' nobody but you." The Mangler had Jack's throat on the lower rope, and Sonny Boy was about to go for the boot in the face when here I came like a tornado, grabbing Sonny Boy by the afro and pulling him over the top rope into the ring, kicking the Mangler out of my way. Happy Jack wallowed on the floor and looked dazed. I booted the Mangler in the face as he got to his knees, and I shrugged off a forearm smash from Sonny Boy only to deal him one of my own that sent him reeling. When it happened, I recalled, the foul bell was ringing away, and Bill Norman was jabbering some nonsense at me I couldn't hear. But that's how we planned it.

I hoisted my Miller's and watched myself fall like a ton of lead onto the comatose Mangler. Bill Norman counted three, but he wouldn't lift my hand. All four men had been in the ring at once. This was a disqualification, and the entire match would have to be fought over again next week. Jack got up off the floor and raised my arm, and we left the twitching badguys on the tarp as we bounced down out of the ring, so happy together.

Big Time cut to the trash session, and Happy Jack called for the bartender to turn the sound up. The guy was big, no question, with oily brown over-long hair and a pair of wire rim glasses. He was a little too old to be a hippie, but I bet he would have been if he could. He kind of sneered at us as he turned up the sound, or at least it seemed like it to me.

There was Mephistopolus with his ragged little goatee and the

pinky ring. The Mangler and Sonny Boy sulked and flexed behind him.

"Mulligan," he wheezed, in his sneaky hoarse ring voice, "Mulligan, do not tamper with what is mine. You are old, Mulligan, an old man in this world of Big Time wrestling, and you cannot stay in the ring with these young . . . strong . . . men! So you bring a youngster, an impetuous stripling, who you have shown how to cheat, to rob me of a victory illegally! But tonight--in the Cobo Arena--you shall see who is the master. You had the muscles, Mulligan, you had the blood . . . but like all Greeks, I have the brains, and I have strong men to show you just how old and pitiful you are. Tonight, Mulligan, in the Cobo Arena, tonight, you are mine!"

Mephistopolus stalked off, and Sonny Boy and the Mangler growled and glared at the camera for a few seconds. Then Happy Jack came on with me at his side.

"I think this just goes to show what kind of a sick mind this man has," Happy Jack said to Jackie Dougall, who was wearing an incredibly loud plaid sports jacket. He looked like a tired old leprechaun, but he pretended to be fascinated by Happy Jack's every word. "His team was obviously using unfair tactics right from the start. They caught me by surprise, and if it hadn't been for Jake here, I'm sure they wouldn't have had any second thoughts about seriously injuring me. I'm real proud of the way Jake here handled them, and I think tonight we're gonna show'em what real wrestlers are made of."

Then I stepped up to the mike. They taped this trashing session right after the match, and I could see the sweat dripping off my brow. I had finally got my own set of custom satin trunks, though, and they looked trim and good on me. Happy Jack's belly hung over his a little

bit, but you could hardly see his stretch marks on TV.

"Well, Jackie, I'm happy to have helped Jack in any way I could. I know I'm new here on the Big Time, but I'm eager to get out there and do my best. I guess I surprised myself as much as I did Mephistopolus and his team, but all I can say is, Mangler and Sonny Boy, look out, 'cause here I come again, tonight, at the Cobo Arena!" They made us mention the Arena as many times as we possibly could during these interviews so the geeks at home would get the idea firmly in mind and show up at the right place. I looked good on TV, but I was still a little out of breath; I panted a little, but it just made me look more ferocious. I was pleased with it.

Happy Jack, who'd been unusually quiet during the show, ordered us another beer as a bout between the Crusher and Killer Carnes came on.

"Y'know, Jake," he said, "I am getting old. I hate to tell you how much Sloan's Liniment and Mentholatum I use every week. I don't have the speed or bounce anymore to make it look good. I rely mostly on the power stuff, forearm smashes and strangleholds, but I think it's almost time I got out of this game."

"Nope, I think after one or two more seasons I'll retire, Jake. I got almost enough money saved for a condo in Florida. Damn, son, it's one mean circuit they got down there, too. Florida's got some crazy sons-of-bitches wrestling these days. Hell, I may become a manager. Or a commentator. Make almost as much dough and not nearly the work."

I didn't know what to say. The bartender came over and gave us our beers, the turd; I bet he wore an earring under that hair. "Compliments of the house to the victorious grapplers," he leered. I expected Jack to throw the beer in his face. He didn't; he looked hard

at him, but he took the glass and started working on it. That's another lesson I learned from Happy Jack: free beer is hard to come by. We drank up and left for the Wyandotte Men's Club to get limber for the bout.

I'll never forget a second of that night; that was the night I made my character. I was nervous. I sat in another of those damn little cubicles, with my .45 Freddy hooked on a nail under the seat for emotional support. Every muscle I had was taut, every sense razor sharp. I had never really smelled the horrible stink down in the dressing area as much as I did that night, sweat, aftershave, and a really strange odor like hangover breath. Maybe it was my own breath from the lunchtime beers.

The naked 75-watt bulb lit up my cubicle like the kliegs in the arena, and I could see every gouge and crack in the cheap fake paneling on the walls. I took Freddy out from under the seat and toyed with the clip, seeing every little pit in the blue finish on the slide and every nick in the grips, feeling a sort of nameless dread and excitement until I heard Bear Martense's voice warbling down the hall, "Mulligan, McGurn, let's go!" And it was time.

Happy Jack and I stood shoulder to shoulder and swaggered into the arena from the south. The geeks were yelling and cheering, and we bounced up into the ring all full of fight. Lord Layton announced us, then did the same for Mike the Mangler and Sonny Boy Banks, "accompanied by their manager, Ari Mephistopolus!"

They waltzed in from the north and got a shower from the stands; I think somebody threw piss, because they stank badly during the bout. Sam Cohn never got used to that; whether he was Mephistopolus or just

Sam, he was always a clean guy.

They came into the ring, with Mephistopolus urging them on, ugly, ugly Mangler and brick wall Sonny Boy, ready for revenge. Our ref that night was Roy the Boy Biby, a guy no more than 19 who really loved the game but was too skinny ever to be a wrestler. He shook his finger at Mephistopolus to warn him about that cane.

The bell rang and the bout was on. Happy Jack and the Mangler went in together, and the geeks knew Happy Jack was out for blood. He did the Big Stomp across the ring toward the Mangler, who fearfully retreated to Mephistopolus over the top rope; the crowd loved seeing him act like a coward. Mephistopolus urged him back in with the cane, prodding him like a cow. Happy Jack roared and went to town. He did go pretty heavily on the forearm smashes, I guess, but they looked awful good. Then he grabbed the Mangler by the trunks and lifted him up for a body slam. I hope I was the only one who noticed the wince he gave when he picked him up. Maybe Jack really really was getting old.

When the Mangler was on the mat and Happy Jack was going for the fall, Sonny Boy hopped in and smashed him in the back of his head. It looked good from my corner, and Happy Jack rolled off the Mangler while Sonny Boy went to work. The geeks were on their feet, screaming for me to go in and save him, but like we planned it, I stood there looking in with my arms folded. The geeks couldn't figure it out.

Both the Mangler and Sonny Boy had Jack now, stomping him and kicking him in the sides. The Mangler was ugly enough to make you believe he really was brutal, but without the muscle and the afro, Sonny Boy would have looked like a bank clerk; he compensated for mild-looking face with ferocious yells and a wild grin. Mephistopolus stood

outside the ring and urged them on.

Then Happy Jack rallied. He raised his hands and caught both of their feet just as they prepared to double-stomp his shoulders, and he pretended to throw them backwards. They did a good job of looking surprised and flew back for a fall, looking stunned long enough for Happy Jack to come to our corner and tag me in. He crawled through the ropes and I bounced in, taking a few steps toward the prone badguys, while they shook their heads and made praying motions with their hands. The geeks roared and shook the roof. It was my last moment of glory as a goodguy.

I suddenly stopped my advance across the ring and made my way back to where Happy Jack stood shaking his head in our corner, facing the geeks, trying to recover. There was almost absolute silence in the arena as the geeks figured out what was coming. Then they started to yell fantically at Happy Jack.

I grabbed him by his hair and pretended to haul him over the top rope as he rolled into the ring with me. Then I faked a flurry of forearm smashes to his face and a couple of kicks to his gut. He rolled and howled in agony. Using his trunks for an assist, I lifted him high above my head, surprising myself with my own strength. Happy Jack was no flyweight, even if he did fake a weak choke hold on me to help me lever him up. When I had him up there, I started to ham it up, glaring around at the geeks and curling up my lips to show my snarl. As I did that, I noticed something out among the geeks that gave me the creepies.

Sometimes wrestlers come and watch the action by sitting with the geeks. This gives the has-beens a chance to act famous and sign

autographs if anyone recognizes them, and it keeps guys with accidental injuries in touch with the latest moves and feuds. Out there, watching me turn on Happy Jack, was a guy in a white mask with black cross-stitching around the eyes and nose-hole and a big red cross right between the eyes on the mask. He was wearing a dark blue suit with it, ridiculous really, but he was right up front in the ring staring at me; it seemed to me that the geek noise faded away for a minute while I locked eyes with this guy, and I actually got goosebumps.

Like I said, this feeling only lasted a second or two, and then I slammed Jack down, letting him break his fall with the meaty part of his forearm on my knee in a fake rib-crusher so he wouldn't hit the mat too hard. He lay there comatose while Sonny Boy and the Mangler talked fast and furious with Mephistopolus, and I pinned Jack for the fall. Roy the Boy came over and started in his monotone, "Hey, whassa matter, ya can't pin yer own partner, whassa matter with ya, ya crazy or some-thin'?"

I motioned the Mangler over and got up off of Jack. I gave him one more boot for good measure and let the Mangler take him for the fall. Roy the Boy slapped three really fast and raised the Mangler's hand, and then the Mangler raised my hand. I looked at the geeks, and for the second time that night I got a chill; I was really glad we had the arena security men there that night, but I've since gotten used to it, that mass look of naked hate. When you first see it, it'll curl your hair.

Mephistopolus crawled into the ring like a snake and took the ring mike from Lord Layton, who'd come on to announce the results.

"I have bought this boy," he slithered out through his loose lips,

"for a great sum of money. McGurn has not even begun to learn the secrets I will show him, secrets that Mulligan--look at the pitiful old man on the mat--secrets he can never know. So Jake, my boy, my dear Jacob--welcome to Destruction Unlimited, the House of Mephistopolus!"

The geeks were going so insane by this time that I couldn't catch half of that when I watched the replay later, but I took the mike and said, "Mr. Mephistopolus has paid me a retaining fee over and above any kind of compensation I would have received from Mulligan, and the man really is getting old; I wanna go where the action is, where I can do my own thing and do it my way, and I think Destruction Unlimited is the way to go. So adios, Jack, and hello, Ari!"

The boos were incredible, a jungle roar like you never heard. And the white-masked guy was still just staring and staring at me out there. Most of the geeks had gotten to their feet, but he just kept sitting there, the kliegs making the red cross look like blood.

Sonny Boy and the Mangler put their arms around me and we all made our way out of the ring toward the north, while Roy the Boy pretended to revive Happy Jack. On the way out, somebody threw a big wad of chewing gum in my hair, and you guessed it, somebody else threw a cup of piss on us, and most of it went on me. I was officially a badguy.

Destruction Unlimited was a collection of badguy wrestlers who got paid a straight salary from Bear Martense, close to two hundred and fifty a week, and bonuses for travelling the civic group circuits. I turned in my resignation at the pickling plant and said goodbye to Gruziak that week, telling him I'd finally turned into a real professional. He shook his head and took me out for a couple of beers at the Fly Inn after we got off shift that night. The bar was pretty empty;

November of '67 was one cold bitch in Wyandotte.

"You're a real pro now, huh, Jake?" he said, slopping the foam from his beer onto that ridiculous handlebar moustache. "You really in the big time, eh?"

"The wonderful world of pro wrestling, John," I said to him. "Did you see me on channel 50 last week?"

"Nah, I don't watch that crap," he said. "No offense, but I'm a football man myself."

"You watch this Saturday, John, you'll see I made a name for myself. Pretty soon, everybody in this area's gonna know me as Jake McGurn."

He rolled his eyes and stuck his big nose back into his glass. The hippie-type bartender wasn't on that night; it was some big fat bald guy with gross-looking sweat rings under his arms. He brought us the tab and said the bar was going to close. Gruziak paid and we went out to the parking lot.

This dirty-looking kid with a scraggly beard and an old fatigue jacket came staggering toward us out of the dark and swirling snow. He looked really jittery.

"Hey, man, you got a match?" he asked, and he dipped his hand into the top pocket of his jacket. Gruziak started digging through his pants, but the kid pulled out the cheapest little switchblade I'd ever seen.

"All right, let's have your cash," he said, waving the knife at us and jittering around with his other arm. I bet he was on drugs.

Gruziak got all googly-eyed. Little flakes of snow were sticking in his handlebar and on his old plaid CPO jacket. He reached around

slow for his wallet.

I made like I was going for mine, too, but I dipped up under my fake leather winter coat and brought Freddy out, racking back the slide with a speed that even I didn't believe I had. The kid and I did the eye-to-eye bit for a minute, and Gruziak yelled, "Oh, shit!"

The kid took off like a bat out of hell. I stood there, shaking a little from the cold, and then I put the safety on and stuck Freddy back under my coat, through the waistband of my Levi's in the back.

I looked at Gruziak and said, "No big deal. Let's go." We went and got into his Volkswagen, an insult to drive for a man who worked at GM in those days, and we motored easy backtoward my apartment, the bug's little washing-machine engine chugging away in the winter dark. Gruziak was real quiet, and then he laughed a little.

"Big man," he said. "Tough man." He didn't say anything else until he dropped me off. But he was impressed. I knew it.

FIVE

During late November and throughout December, I met the other members of Destruction Unlimited and wrestled almost every weekend. Usually, I wrestled some no-name just to give the crowd a thrill and prove my dirtiness, but sometimes I got to tag-team with one of the other members of Sam Cohn's "stable." There was a black-masked wrestler named Doctor Devastation, one of the fattest wrestlers I've ever seen. This guy had no muscle tone, but his mounds of glabrous fat made him seem really decadent and evil. He had been a pre-med student at the University of Michigan until he found out that wrestling paid well and studying didn't. They touted him on the circuit as a real doctor who had lost so many patients that he had to take up a new career, and he supposedly knew secret pressure points on the human body to render his opponents unconscious and, occasionally, near-dead. He ate those marshmallow Moon Pies constantly and washed them down with RC cola. Under the mask, he looked sort of like Fatty Arbuckle; if the geeks had seen his real face, they'd have laughed him out of the ring.

The Ape Man was quite a character. He had supposedly been captured wild somewhere in Africa, "a living embodiment of the Tarzan legend." He was truly well-built and had more body hair, thick, black, and curly, than I'd ever seen on any man before; he kept his head shaved except for a little top-knot that he sometimes pulled in mock frustration in the ring. He lived in a monthly rental room in the Granville Hotel downtown, and apparently he never left it except to

wrestle. I got to be pretty good friends with him, and I found something out about him that few people ever knew. The man could cook. He had all of his groceries delivered, and he never missed an episode of The French Chef on channel 13; he made fun of Julia Child's voice and said she was the only person he knew who could speak English and still need English subtitles, but he faithfully copied down all her recipes and sometimes even improved on them. He wasn't a fag, don't get me wrong; he just liked to cook. I never found out his real name.

Happy Jack had been trashing me on the TV for a few weeks, building up the feud and saying that my treachery was "sharper than an ungrateful serpent's tooth," and I, in turn, went on once in a while after I had ruined some no-name and told Jack that I didn't have anything against him personally, but I'd meet him under any conditions he wanted.

The more outrageous the act, the better the geeks love it. Some of the guys called this "camping it up"; it meant that if you were a badguy, you added ridiculous stuff to your act, and the geeks have something more to hate, which makes them feel like they're getting their money's worth. The Ape Man, for instance, started off by just beating his chest in the ring and jumping up and down when he won a match; later, he started to bring bananas and eat them in the ring, and sometimes he would slip the banana peel into a corner of the ring where his opponent could trip on it. Later still, Bear Martense had him take a little spider monkey into the ring and imitate it; the Ape Man hated that little bastard, so Sam ended up taking care of it for him. Most of the rest of us liked the little thing, but the Ape Man said it was filthy and noisy. Sam found out that bananas gave it the runs (and

almost ruined a match because of that), but otherwise he said it wasn't that much trouble.

It was hard to think of things to develop my character. Happy Jack taught me the Steel Thumb, a nerve pinch, and said I should use it on him during our grudge match. You may think it was bad for our images to be seen together in public, but no none really noticed us except for the faggy bartender at the Fly Inn, and he didn't care; I guess there aren't too many geeks in Wyandotte.

Bear Martense had scheduled our grudge match for the Christmas Eve extravaganza, figuring that Jack was so popular he could draw in the geeks who had nothing better to do, and knowing the regulars would show up anyway. We were scheduled for a no-disqualification loser-leaves-town match, and that would have some drawing power to it.

Winter has always been one of my favorite seasons. There aren't any bugs around, and a lot of the dirt and filth of the city gets covered up in a big white blanket of snow. But this winter of '67 wasn't happy for me, even though I'd found a career. I kept thinking of Ed and Ida and the Christmases we'd spent, when they'd buy me some present they really couldn't afford, and Ed would slip me some money to get Ida something, and Ida would do the same for Ed. I was missing them something fierce, but I wondered if they were still mad at me for the fiasco at school; remember, I was still pretty young then, and I didn't know that people who love you can forgive stuff like that. I moped around my apartment a lot, and I drank too much beer alone in my living room.

Finally I bought them a Christmas card, one of those with a sleigh scene on the front and some kind of fake silvery-white snow pasted on

that flakes off on your fingers. I wrote something like, "I'm doing fine and I still love you," and I signed it with my real name, Jake Mueller, but I didn't put my return address on it. I mailed it off to the old house on Helen Street, and I felt a little better.

My social life was still nothing to speak of. I hung out with Happy Jack and worked out almost every day to prevent a beer gut, and I saw the guys from Destruction Unlimited for parties sometimes. We usually got together at Sam Cohn's apartment on Riverside and drank too much booze. There were some nice-looking women at these parties once in a while, usually the Mangler's girlfriends (I often wondered how much money he had to shell out to get them to go with him) or women Sam knew from his neighborhood. I didn't talk to them much; what could I say? Usually I sat in one corner and drank my beer, or an occasional snort of the hard stuff. Sam's apartment was done up in all these day-glow zodiac posters and the like, and he had some black lights mounted along the walls. Sometimes Sam would smoke dope with Sonny Boy and Doctor Devastation, whose real name was Eugene Wentz; I usually left when they did that, taking a taxi back to Wyandotte, and I never tried it, no matter how much fun they made of me.

These parties didn't happen very often, and I spent the rest of my free time that winter going to used car lots and pricing some of the older models they had there. I was saving part of my salary, a little at a time, so that I could get one and quit bumming rides off the other guys or taking a taxi to Cobo. WABX used to play my music most of the time, so I listened to that a lot on the little transistor I had. If I wanted TV, I could go to the Fly Inn and nurse a Stroh's through a couple of programs. I really enjoyed Star Trek, a real favorite with

the terminal drunks, and I especially liked Mr. Spock. In those days, I used to wish I had no emotions either.

Mostly, though, it was me alone in the apartment while the big flakes of snow came twirling down, looking out my window at the cars kicking the ugly gray slush out of the gutters with their oversize tires, wondering where they were going, taking my .45 Freddy apart to clean him with an oily rag. On sunny days, which always seem brighter in a Michigan winter than they do in the summer, I walked around the block once in a while; I never saw anything out of the ordinary. Little kids in those blue parkas with the furry hoods that used to be popular; old farts shovelling snow off their sidewalks, wearing wool coats and baggy pants; icicles on rain gutters breaking off in the afternoon sun and silently falling in the snow. Dow Chemical loosed its smells on the world, and I always wondered about Ed when I caught their weird stench; if it was after four, I'd wonder whether or not he'd be at the plant yet, subtly lippping off to Fenelli the foreman when he got the chance. Then I'd go home to try to dream up some moves for my next bout.

If you've never felt that kind of loneliness, you won't know what I'm talking about, the way things flow around you without touching you, like an icy river around a barren island. It's not a negative thing, it's a positive feeling; not the absence of other people, but an overwhelming feeling of self, unbearably pure feelings of intimacy. At times like that, "know thyself" is the most horrible joke in the world. Sure, you can sit around hating people like Nora and Eddie Dupler and all the rest of the world's dirtbags because they've done you dirty, but that palls after a while, and then it's just you and the walls and,

after a time, the snow. That loneliness was always there, just inside my apartment, waiting for me like some old widow with only me to tell her problems to.

Christmas Eve came, and with it my big grudge match with Happy Jack. Sam knew I was a little nervous, and he reassured me that I'd do just fine, that I'd bring the house down; the geeks would never forget me, and Happy Jack could take his vacation to Mid-South. Detroit was awash in the usual Christmas lights and decorations on the streets; they just made me feel worse, and the big wreath on the klieg overhang above the ring reminded me more of a funeral than a holiday.

Jackie Dougall did the ring announcements that time; I guess Lord Layton had the night off. Jack looked properly ferocious, the grim avenger, justice on his side; I camped it up, growling and waving my arms.

The bell went off and we charged, me windmilling my arms and Jack going for the enraged bull approach. We met in a mutual neck grab and waltzed for a little while. The geeks seemed sort of subdued during that first little clash; maybe they had that Christmas depression, too. Bill Norman looked like he did; his adam's apple didn't bob once during the whole match, and his finger-shaking was pretty listless. Happy Jack threw me for a loop with a double-arm reverse, and I did a summersault to make it look good; I sat on my ass and howled while he ran up to put a choke on me. Bill apathetically asked me if I'd like to give up, and I did the headshake while I slapped the canvas with my palms. Then I pulled Jack's hair and took him to the mat while Bill looked away. I grabbed Jack's head between my legs, but my heart wasn't in it; he howled a little and kicked his feet while the geeks booed me. I

flipped my legs up to pretend I was bouncing his head off the canvas; he reached toward my trunks to fake an illegal pull, but jerked his hand away. He was a goodguy.

I jumped to my feet and made come-on motions with my hands, taunting him. He got warily to his feet, fake blood-lust in his eyes. He advanced toward me, and slowly I drew back my fist like I was going to punch him into the new year. Give him credit, though, he still had some of the speed he thought he'd lost. He faked a flurry of smashes to my gut, and I doubled over, starting to hump my way around the ring in mock agony. Like a striking snake, he took me to the floor in another headlock; again, I hair-pulled my way out of it and went running over to Mephistopolus. Sam shouted his words of encouragement while Jack stalked me and I circled around, and as he came around my corner to get me, Mephistopolus tripped him with that cane. The geeks went nuts; we'd shaken them out of their winter doldrums.

I flopped on top of Happy Jack and pulled the piece de resistance; while Bill Norman was chastising Mephistopolus, I took a foreign object out of my trunks and pretended to beat Jack's brain out with it. It was a piece of foam rubber cut to look like brass knucks, and Sam had soaked it in red food coloring and vegetable oil; I squeezed it all over Jack's forehead and it looked like I had really bloodied him. This sort of thing was pretty rare at that time; the geeks didn't used to be as blood-hungry as they are now. They were all on their feet, stamping and yelling, actually making the tarp vibrate with their roar. It was then that I finally camped it up a little, sticking the foam knucks back in my trunks and standing over prone Jack to do a little war dance, rolling back my eyes. I had something caught in my throat;

I guess the winter had been doing a job on me with that biting north-wind, and I had a borderline cold.

Anyway, I started to cough and even drool a little during the dance, and then I blew air through the spit that was forming in my mouth and drooled foam onto my chin. I fell to the mat like Curly in the Three Stooges and started to twitch and rotate around. Even Bill Norman looked a little surprised at that, but I came to my feet and fell across Jack for the pin. The geeks were going wild, and Sam was shouting across the ring; Bill slapped three, and I staggered out.

The shower from the geeks wasn't too bad that night, the worst of it being a Santa Claus sucker some damn little kid must have thrown getting stuck in my hair. It came out under the tap in the men's room. After I'd freshened up, Sam and Doctor Devastation and Happy Jack all wished me a Merry Christmas, and Jack gave me a present. I must have let my literary leanings slip, because he gave me the complete Lancer paperback set of Conan the Barbarian, all done up in clean white butcher paper with a red ribbon around them. I felt like a shitheel because I hadn't gotten him anything, but I offered to take him out for dinner and drinks. He couldn't go; his bus left for Louisiana at 9:30.

"Jake, you take care of yourself while I'm gone," he said, the gray peeking through the dye-job again. "I'll be back in May sometime, and when I come back, we'll have a rematch. I want you to be the dirtiest badguy on the Big Time circuit, okay?"

I had a catch in my throat from my ring antics, and I was afraid I'd parlay it into something worse if I said too much. "Will do, Jack," I said. "You give those crackers down there a good show, hear me?"

"You bet," he said with a smile. "They love me down there, too. I'm supposed to do some big New Year's show with a colored badguy they got down there. I'm gonna send his black ass to the moon."

"Don't let Sonny Boy hear you say that, Jack, or he'll put his Soul Squeeze on you," said Doctor Devastation, holding his inevitable RC cola.

"Ah, I don't mean nothin'," said Jack. "And if he gives me any trouble, I guess I'll just have to reintroduce him to that infamous . . ."

Everybody yelled, "Steel turnbuckle!" and we all laughed. Sam broke out a bottle of Mogen David from Doctor Devastation's cubicle and we all had a slug in little Dixie cups from Eugene's little black doctor bag, his ring prop with fake foreign objects and moon pies in it. I swear I almost cried, knowing this was the last time I'd see the guys 'til after Christmas.

"What's Santa gonna bring you?" Eugene asked, and I just looked at him.

"I dunno, I just asked for booze and broads; I hope I get one or the other," I said feebly, and the Doctor laughed.

"If you get the clap, you know who to come to," he said.

"What, can you cure the clap?" I asked.

"Naw," he wheezed, and tossed off the last of his Mogen David, "but you can tell me to stay away from her!"

There was instant groaning and booing from Sam and Happy Jack, and I poured the rest of my Mogen David over Eugene's head. The Doctor roared and made to grapple with me, but Sam did his Mephistopolus voice and hissed, "Now, now, boys, no fighting in my stable. If you don't

break it up, Doctor, I'll have to tell the geeks your real name, and you, Jake, I'll have you arrested for public ugliness." Everyone laughed again, and Sam poured more Mogen David.

I was feeling no pain, you understand, after a little while; that Christmas gloom was slowly eroding away under the spell of the wine and the other guys. I gave Happy Jack a big handshake and shoulder-pat before he took off on that bus to Shreveport, and then I had a little more of the grape with Sam and the bad boys. My tongue got loose, and at one point I gave a loud rendition of "Maybelline" by one of the greatest, big Chuck Berry. The guys laughed, and Eugene threw some RC cola at me when I bowed.

And, being heartily screwed up, I forgot to ask one of the guys for a ride home; they left one by one until the Doctor and Sam wished me Merry Christmas and Happy Hannukah and drifted off. So there I was with Freddy when the old grey-headed black janitor came in in his dingy white coveralls and told me the Arena was closed.

I staggered somehow to the parking lot, a gradual paranoia starting to cut through the wine-fog. I was all alone in downtown Detroit late at night, practically waiting to be robbed or worse. I ducked into the shadow of the building and cocked and locked Freddy, sliding him into my front pants pocket under my brown vinyl winter coat so I could be fast on the draw if I ran into any trouble.

I started lurching randomly around the building, looking for a pay phone. Little flakes of snow were starting to fall, covering the tire tracks and making the night seem uncomfortably claustrophobic, shutting me off into a little area of relative security next to the edge of the building. Making my way toward the multilevel parking area, I saw a

couple of shadowy figures emerging from the drifting snow, coming out of an area of darkness where one of the purplish sodium vapor lamps had been shattered. I was nervously tucking up my coat and going slowly for my .45 when one of them spoke.

"Jacob?" there came to me on the winter wind, in a querulous old-womanish voice.

"Babe?" there came from the other one, and then they hove into sight and I knew, I knew who it was. It was Ed and Ida, come for me on Christmas Eve.

We all hugged, a cold threesome in the December dark. What the hell else was I supposed to do? And there was a rush of words torn apart by the freezing wind.

"Missed you," Ida said, "missed you like crazy, Jacob."

"Hey, Babe, got a name for yourself, hah?" from Ed, and ah, was that a tear in his eye or just the cold that made it water?

"Oh God," I said, "Oh God God God." And I hugged them and blew my winey breath in their faces and yes, the tears were rolling down my cheeks. Unashamed, I cried there in the shadow of the Cobo Arena. I wasn't prepared for this stuff, not at all, and the holiday depression washed out of me in that salty flow from my eyes. Come to think of it, I think that was the very last time I ever cried in public, but there wasn't anybody there except Ed and Ida to see it.

She'd put on a few pounds, no question; I could feel her fat through her quilted blue winter coat. Ed was wearing the same old red-and-black plaid CPO jacket he'd worn every winter since I could remember, but there seemed to be some new wrinkles this Christmas Eve, a few more scars on his already-shrivelling hands. "Gloves is for faggots,

Babe," he always told me when I was a kid. I never wore them either.

They got me back to the old Terraplane, same old joke car, and took me off to the house on Helen Street. We didn't say much on the way back. I sat in the back seat and hunched myself over the front seat, hanging my arms around them; drunk as hell, I told them how much I'd missed them. Hot damn, but that was a ride! I'll never forget it. I was going home, all my sins forgiven, forgotten; I had a family again.

Now, you may not think Ed would be a sentimental man, nor Ida one to hang on to the garbage of the past, but they'd kept my room at home just like I'd left it. They showed it to me proudly, as if I'd died and they'd given me a swell funeral. There was my old Fokker triplane, my Spitfire, my Hellcat, my Avenger; on my dresser, all my Charlie Brown books and my textbooks from philosophy and English and my Dow Chemical jacket patch still sat, just like I'd left them all those months before.

"We were worried sick, Babe," Ed said, in tones like it was something to be ashamed of. "We didn't know if you'd killed yourself or gone off to some hippie commune or what.

Ida broke in. "Then Walinsky on the afternoon shift told Ed--you remember Walinsky, he's your dad's oldest friend--he told him he'd seen a guy that looked like you on the wrestling Saturday. Sure enough, we watched last week and there you were."

"So I says to Ida," Ed said, "I says to her, hey, let's go get the Babe next week, he's on the Christmas Eve card. And we did, and here you are."

It all came out in a rush from me--the stuff about Nora, how I

got into the sweepstakes, Happy Jack, everything--and they ate it up. Hell, I was somebody; I was on TV.

"Jake, that shit ain't really real, is it? Ed asked. "I mean, you didn't really turn against that Happy Jack guy, did you?"

"Language, Ed," Ida said, but I was shaking my head.

"Naw, Dad, you know me better than that. We had to do that to keep the geeks--the guys who watch it--to keep'em tuning in. We don't get hurt or anything."

"Yeah, that's what I figured," he said. "I knew you wasn't no real badguy."

"Don't tell anybody, Dad, it'd ruin me," I said, but they were smiling at me fit to bust, and I knew everything was okay.

"Did you get my card?" I asked, and they led me back to the living room. There was the damn thing topping the Christmas tree. I was really impressed.

"Oh, Jacob, we love you!" Ida said, and she ran over to hug me. I noticed they had a brand new Zenith over on the end table. Otherwise, nothing had changed; even my crappy old green chair was still sitting by the living room window.

It was late, but Ida wanted to fix me something to eat. I wasn't really hungry, but I had a beer with Ed; Ida looked stunned, but Ed took it as a matter of course. The beer mixed really well with the Mogen David, and I turned on the old Philco, which they'd moved into the kitchen. You could still get some oldies on AM in those days; life could be a dream, sweetheart. They didn't object, so glad were they to have me back.

After about a million questions on my experiences in the wicked

wicked world, they let me crawl off to bed. I'd had half of all the beer Ed had on hand from his buddy at Stroh's, and I was wrecked, no doubt about it, but it was just a little Christmas Eve cheer, and God knows I needed it. Ida turned off the Philco with an efficient little snap before I rose from the kitchen table to weave off down the hall.

Alcohol is a funny thing; sometimes I wonder if it's not a lot like all those hippie drugs. I didn't fall asleep after all that beer and wine; instead, I sprawled on my creaking old kid's bed, staring at the shadows from my model planes that the streetlights outside my window threw across the wall. What did I think of? Well, I tried to imagine what it would be like to live with Ed and Ida again, for one thing; I wondered if they'd expect me to go back to school and get my degree, or if they'd let me continue in wrestling. I could see myself, thirty, thirty-five years old, still sleeping in this same old bed and looking at those dusty old models on the ceiling. Was that what I wanted?

I didn't know then and I don't know now. Parents are something you can't take for granted; Ed and Ida, though, weren't my real parents. They did the best they could, sure, but their blood wasn't mine. If I stayed with them, I'd have the same old thing forever. Sure, Ed might let me have a beer or two with him, and Ida might let me swear with Ed without too much flak, but my whole heart and mind would still be in that little cage I'd lived in since I was a kid, still remembering that fight with Dupler and the ass-pinching of my high school days as the biggest events of my life. No matter how much money I made wrestling, Ed and Ida would want something better for me, and if I didn't give up grappling, I'd feel those poisoned hopes rotting in my

skull until I died. Now I ask you, what kind of future is that?

The only thing I could think of to get me to sleep that night was the ring, the ring, struggling against something I could at least understand, get a grip on, evil one against the good many. I think I ran the lyrics from "The Great Pretender" through my head before I slept, and that helped.

That Christmas morning was a kind of nightmare. I was hung over (naturally), with some of the aftermorning weirdness a drinking spree always brings. Ed and Ida persisted in keeping Santa Claus alive, pretending great surprise when I opened my gifts. I got a nice pair of black satin trunks with Jake printed in glitter down the legs, a subscription to Creepy magazine (actually a handwritten note from Ida telling me about it), and a plaque (I bet it was Ed's idea) telling me that I was The World's Greatest Wrestler. I hugged them both, telling them my thanks over their protests that, "Santa must've known just what to bring." I could've cried from the memories, the ghosts of Christmas past, but I held it in; I know tradition when I see it.

Paranoia--that was the real Ghost of Christmas Present that year. I knew I'd done wrong; I went against what they wanted. They wanted a young professor, an academic giant, somebody they could brag about at Dow or in the checkout line at Farmer Jack's. Instead, they got a pro wrestler. What a kick in the ass.

I swear, I think the only thing that got me through that reunion with Ed and Ida was the thought of Freddy, my .45. I knew that if they were so disappointed in me they didn't want me anymore, I could step out with just a tap on the trigger with the barrel jammed against my temple; Freddy was always ready to go. That was my way out, my ticket

to a better place. Holy shit I couldn't tell you all the times this idea got me through, not only during this particular miserable Christmas, but also during all the bad times before and still to come. Even booze and beer couldn't compare to the comfort Freddy offered me. I could take my own exit.

Ida still believed in all the trappings of every Christmas we'd had together. There was turkey, naturally, with cranberry sauce and all the damn trimmings, stuff we'd had every Christmas since I could remember, mashed potatoes and all the rest of it. Ed gorged like he always did, and I tried to follow his example, even though my gut was rolling and tossing like a heavy sea. Ida was packing away more of it than I remembered, dribbling a drop or two of cranberry sauce down her blue and yellow print dress. I know now how she got so fat. I did it.

Those flowers on her dress--that's what I remember. For the first time ever, I got to drink beer with Ed at the Christmas meal. The more I drank, the more I noticed little things. Ed hadn't shaved; his blue jowls stuck out, the sign of his time off from Dow. He drank beer, good old Stroh's, with his turkey. Ida had to remind him several times about his bad language, and I, drunk on Stroh's the same as Ed, just laughed when she tried to restore order to the meal.

We all pretended I hadn't been off on my own. Ed still called me Babe, and Ida wondered about my chances of getting back into Wayne State. And hell, I went along with them. Wasn't I still fat, studious, quiet Jacob Mueller, the same kid who always made good grades and just asked for a few pulps to tide him over? No, I was someone new, but in the winter light, in the beer haze, it seemed like it could still be the same.

Honest to God, it was just like being a werewolf on the channel 50 Creature Feature on Saturday night. In the ring, I'd always been Jake McGurn for good or bad. Back at home, I was Jacob, the Babe, same as always. Ida asked me if I'd been eating my vegetables, and I told her about the Joe Weider protein and all the nourishment I got out of that. Ed asked me how much money I made in the game, and when I told him about my salary arrangement with Bear Martense, he seemed impressed.

The meal was really the only part of that Christmas that didn't seem uncomfortable to me. I ate really well, thinking to myself that Ida's cooking beat the Ape Man's hands down. I matched Ed beer for beer, and I finally reached that happy stage beer brings, the warm, loose feeling in the gut and brain that tells you to relax, everything is okay. After dinner, we sat on the flower-print couch in the living room playing "do-you-remember."

"Hey, Jake," Ed said, feeling good himself, "do you remember when you was about eight years old and found all your Christmas presents under the bed in our room?"

"Yeah, Dad, I remember," I said. "It was a couple of nights before Christmas Eve, and I crawled in there to play after I had my bath. I had those toy soldiers, right? And I set'em up on your dresser, like to defend a mountain, and the rest I put under the bed like hiding in a cave. And there was my Roy Rogers six-shooter and the little spaceship you got me, and a coonskin hat like on Davy Crockett behind'em."

"You sure have a good memory, Jacob," said Ida. "I'd forgotten what all we got you that year."

"And then on Christmas morning," Ed went on, "there wasn't none of it under the tree, nothing. You didn't know we'd seen you in there and

backed out kinda quiet that night before. So you looked real confused and we told you Santy was sick that year, and you got all whiny and ran off to your room--"

"And there they were," I chuckled, "sitting on my bed in a big pile, and right next to 'em, a big red fire engine with a hose that really pumped water."

"That I remember," said Ida. "We wanted you to have a little surprise, anyway."

Then panic hit me, just with that one remark that showed me the big difference between then and now, cutting through my warm beery feeling like a razor. I remembered that fire engine, the way it showed me that no matter what happened, Ed and Ida really loved me and wanted to make me happy; I had the feeling when I was a kid that life was secure, serene, that it would go on like it always had forever. That was a feeling I lost when Nora shot me down, when I left home for what I thought would be forever. I never got it back.

Maybe Ed saw it on my face. "Hey, Babe, let's go get some beer. We're out, but Richman's is open today." Ida started to protest that Ed wasn't in any shape to drive, that holidays are the worst time for accidents, but we both got bundled up and headed out the door.

"You be careful, Edward Mueller!" she cried from the porch behind us. We got into the Terraplane and cruised off easy through the slushy, deserted holiday streets. Dix, good old Dixie Highway, took us past Gregory Park, Farmer Jack's, the radio station, all the gas stations along the way. Finally, we pulled up at Richman Drugs.

"Hell, Babe," Ed said, swiping at his nose in the frosty air as we got out of the car, "I used to have to go here every Christmas to get

batteries for some damn toy or other we got you. I always forgot the batteries, it never failed. I bet that makes half their sales here on Christmas."

"That and beer," I said, and he laughed. Richman's was always a good store. They had plenty of comics and a huge penny candy section that added its share to my childhood flab. We got two six-packs of Stroh's, with Ed waving off my offer of paying for it.

"My treat, Babe," he said, tipping a wink to the pretty blond teenager behind the counter. It shocked me. She just kept popping her gum, looking gloomy as she rang up the price of the brew. This was a side of Ed I'd never seen before; it gave me that panicky grown-up feeling again, but I gave him a weak smile I hoped looked lecherous. He didn't mean any harm, but the girl had a nasty look in her eye as she slammed the bag on the counter and gave him a brisk, "Thank you" that sounded more like "Piss off." She must have been mad about having to work on Christmas Day. Ed looked kind of hurt, though; it came to me that he, like Happy Jack, realized that he was getting old. The girl turned away from us, clamping her jaw down on her gum, pretending to rearrange the stock, and I hope there's a special hot corner of hell reserved for people like that. It wouldn't have hurt her to go along with him just a little.

We got back into the car and Ed drove us safely home; even drunk, he was a careful driver. Ida looked relieved, so much so that she didn't complain when we proceeded to get into the new beer. In fact, she surprised us both when she had one, "instead of champagne," she said, to celebrate my homecoming.

"Will you stay, Jacob?" she asked in this pitiful tone of voice.

Ed's beer-slack face suddenly got very watchful.

I had it, then, an inspiration that would get me out of the house and let me keep my career without breaking their hearts.

"Well, sure, Mom, I'd love to," I began. I knew I could apply the money I'd save from giving up my digs in Wyandotte to the purchase of a good used car. "But I guess you know I'm going to have to travel a lot pretty soon."

Ed opened another beer and gave me one, too, not noticing I hadn't finished my first one. "How's that son?" he asked.

"Well, Dad, on the Big Time circuit, I play the same matches at Cobo and then go on the civic center route. The Lions' Clubs and Rotarians and people like that sponsor a wrestling card at some auditorium or school gym, and I go there and repeat the match I did earlier. It's like a travelling road show." This was true, to some extent. Bear Martense hadn't asked me to go on tour yet, but I figured it would just be a matter of time, me being a well-known badguy and all. If I could rotate with the Mid-Atlantic circuit, I could travel up and down the east coast and stay in cheap motels and sleeping rooms while I played the local tickets. I learned all this from Happy Jack, but he preferred to rotate with Mid-South because it was warmer down there.

"No shit?" asked Ed. "You're going to be some kind of star?"

"Sure, Dad. I'll be on TV and everything. I can stay in some of the more inexpensive places 'cause I'm not a real big wrestler yet, but I'll travel all up and down the Mid-Atlantic seaboard." That made it sound a little more important.

"But when you're in Detroit, Jacob, you would stay with us,

wouldn't you?" asked Ida.

I beamed at her. "Sure, Mom," I said, "I'm glad to be back home." I killed my beer and opened the one Ed had handed me.

"When you gotta go back to work, Babe?" Ed asked me, and his features went loose again, but this time there was a happy gleam in his eye.

"I'm scheduled for a New Year's Day bout with Tim Tyler," I said. "It's strictly a warm-up to get the geeks excited. I'll lose it fast."

"Babe, you got a lot better work schedule than me," Ed said. Can you believe that? He envied me! "I gotta be back on the line tomorrow with that greaseball Fenelli. Hey, Babe, you know what I said to him the other day? I says, 'Hey, Fenelli, goombah, where can I get me some Italian snow tires?' And he says, 'I don't-a know whatta you mean, Mueller,' so I says, 'You know, Italian snow tires. Dago through sleet, dago through mud, and when dago flat, dago wop wop wop.'"

"That's not nice, Ed," Ida said, but it struck me funny, what with the Stroh's and the last lashings of my hangover, and I doubled up while Ed faked a scowl.

"Then he put me to work in caustics and solvents. I'll solvent him someday," and this made me even worse, though I don't know why. Tears were rolling down my cheeks, and after a little bit, they both started laughing at me.

"Wop wop wop," Ed said again, but it wasn't really that I was laughing at; I just felt good to be home and to be accepted for what I was, a grappler, by two good people who really cared for me.

Throughout the rest of that afternoon and evening, as Ed and I killed the rest of the Stroh's and ate the stuff Ida warmed up for us,

the gloom and tension I'd felt eased away, little by little, until finally we all went off to bed. I had a home, and I had a career. It looked like I was going to be flying high.

SIX

So that was that. I did go home for a while, moving my stuff (and there wasn't a lot of it) from my cheap apartment in Wyandotte back to my old home on Helen Street. Ed and Ida didn't make as big a fuss about my chosen career as I'd thought they would, but they did still think of me as the Babe, a kid who never grew up. Naturally, I didn't much care for that, but I put all the money I saved in an account at Security National Bank. I planned to have a car before '68 was out.

That spring was one of my best. I was able to buy Ida a few nice print dresses at the Sears over in Southgate, and I bought Ed new seat covers for the Terraplane, fake chamois jobs from J.C. Whitney. He loved them. And many's the night I sprung for pizza from Little Caesar's at the plaza next to the Lincoln Park trailer park. You know, they call those places mobile home courts these days; how's that for bullshit? Trailer parks they were and always will be to me.

Little Caesar's was my favorite place back then, and if it weren't for that, the cramped little parlor underneath the rotating statue of a cartoon Caesar with a slice of pizza impaled on his spear, I never would have found out about the Dix Convenience Station. You have to remember, this was in the days before there was a damn 7-11 every two blocks, back when mostly all there was was service stations that held a few extras and little mom and pop stores that carried groceries plus.

The Dix Convenience Station was two blocks south of Little Caesar's on Dix, and we stopped there once when I'd had too much brew

with the pizza and had to take a leak. They sold Phillips 66 gas with the big orange ball hanging bright over the pumps under the little service island out front, but instead of the boxy building that most service stations had, they operated out of what looked like it had been a respectable small store at one time, a building with double glass doors and a couple of small windows with grillwork bars, a rarity in Lincoln Park then. The restrooms were inside, so naturally I got to take a look at their stock on the way to the pisser.

I had to go bad, but you can be damn sure I stopped on the way out. I'd fought an afternoon bout with Timmy Tyler, another blond goodguy, at Cobo, and dirtied him to win; afterward, we had the celebratory pizza like always, so I guess it was about 7:30 or so in the evening that first time, late enough so only the old lady was on. I got to know her later, but only casually; she was a white-haired old soul with gray rhinestone-trimmed glasses who sat on a little stool behind the candy counter and read Mickey Spillane as long as she knew you wouldn't steal anything.

I didn't have too much interest in her that first night, though; I was too busy checking out the merchandise. You have to understand that inside, when I was back home, I was still a kid; no matter that I was a big strong man in the ring, at home I was still little Jake. In spite of Ed's changing attitude toward me, Ida still acted like I was only ten years old, and although she saw me wrestle many times, although she could see I was really a man, to her I was still just little Jake, world without end, amen. As you might guess I did everything I could to convince her I'd grown up; but inside, I longed in a way for those dim dead days when all I had to do was lounge in my crappy green chair

by the window and read my pulps.

That's what got me about the Dix Convenience Station. The pulps were about dead, with the damn Comics Code that killed the illustrated ones and the disinterest of kids and young adults in the ones that were mostly fiction. But here, on a big rack in that little store, were comics to fire the imagination. The covers got me. There was Amazing Science Fiction, with a thing that looked like a cross between an octopus and parrot menacing a well-built astronaut and a brunette with huge tits. There was House of Mystery with a pretty blonde looking up in fear at a clock striking twelve. Comics, I tell you, of all styles and colors crammed haphazardly on this rack in the Dix Convenience Station, just waiting for me!

I knew Ed and Ida were waiting for me in the car; I also knew they'd come looking for me if I took too long. I grabbed a few of the comics with lurid covers and I also bought a box of Milk Duds and some Good-n-Plenty's. I felt sort of ashamed as I did it; here I was, a grown man buying this kid stuff, but I went through with it. Late that night, after Ed and Ida went to bed, I stayed up in my room under the light of my Ethan Allen colonial two-bulb lamp, reading my comics and eating my candy like I did when I was young. It was a comforting feeling, but it seemed weird at the same time, like a perversion almost.

In times to come, I would buy more and more stuff at the Dix Convenience Station, stuff like baseball cards, peashooters, more comics, and finally, triumphantly, three years after I discovered the store, the first issue of Conan the Barbarian from good old Marvel comics. I've got them all; there are over four hundred issues now, and I bet they're worth a pile of money.

My wrestling career went pretty well, too. That spring, I developed a feud with Timmy Tyler. He was pretty shrimpy for a wrestler, standing about five nine and weighing in at 190. He combed his blond hair in the old fifties' style called a D.A., and all the little girls who came to the matches were nuts about him. I had a few beers with him from time to time. He was okay, but he was a loner type, like me; he got hooked into the game because he had nothing better to do, and he was sort of ashamed of the sport. In my boozy moments, I resented that sometimes; after all, I would have given a lot if those little girls (or any girls) had been crazy over me. But Timmy kept mostly to himself, and I never got to be friends with him like I did with a lot of the other guys I had feuds with over the years.

Our feud that spring was something to see. I dirtied him good in the early matches with the eye gouge and illegal chokes and the Steel Thumb, but he started coming back with lots of acrobatic stuff and dancing around that, I admit, looked pretty good. He especially liked to climb on the top rope and do a backward flip to fake a kick to my face; smaller guys can do moves like that really well. Anyway, it kept the geeks tuning in and coming to Cobo.

I remember the time I went to the Cee'em Bar (and I don't know what the hell that name meant) with Timmy, out beyond the Serta Mattress store near where Dix met I-75. He was supposed to drop me off at my house after our first April bout, but we went on down past Helen to grab a quick few for the weekend. There was a big mural of a woman lying on a mattress painted on the wall of the Serta outlet store, with her ass just out of sight where the wall ended. Somebody had spray-painted the tip of her ass-crack partly up her back, and nobody had

painted it over, not since I was a small child. I pointed it out to Timmy and he laughed.

Like Gruziak, Timmy drove a VW, a baby-blue one with a sunroof. He parked in front of the Cee'em and we went in. It was dark in there, like in all good bars, and the stools along the main bar were patched up with electrician's tape where they'd split under the weight of beer-soaked bodies over the years. The green felt on the place's only pool table was gouged in half-a-dozen places, but the juke, the sweet old Wurlitzer bubbler, carried my songs from the fifties hiding in among all the Johnny Cash crap and the fagpop .45's. Timmy ordered the first round (he was an Budweiser man, and who was I to complain if it was free?) while I dropped a quarter in the juke and punched in "Heartbreak Hotel" and "Tutti-Frutti."

Michigan's always been big on thunderstorms in the spring; you could hear the rumble of a good one brewing outside even over the King's voice as I sat there with Timmy drinking my beer. He looked deep into the mellow amber glow of his Old Milwaukee and frowned.

"Jake," he said, "this is a rotten business we're in."

"How's that, Timmy boy?" Hell, he must have been a good year younger than me.

"Well, we go out there, out there in the ring, and we bash each other good, but it doesn't mean anything. You're supposed to be evil, I'm supposed to be good, but there's not one damn thing different between you and me, and you know it. I just can't believe the geeks are stupid enough not to see that."

"Tim," I said, getting serious, "the thing of it is, see, that it doesn't matter. In the ring, in that squared circle, I am evil and you

are good. That's all they want to see. Look, Timmy, I'm bigger than you. There's no question about that, right? Okay. But the point of it is that no matter how big I am, no matter how dirty I am, you're gonna win sooner or later. Do you see that? Good always wins. Evil always loses. That's what the geeks want to see."

I felt like I'd made my point, an important one. I guzzled the rest of my beer, and Timmy waved his arm at the bartender to bring me another one.

"Yeah, Jake, but it's not real," he said, working on his beer. "I was in pre-law at UM before I got into this racket, did you know that? I've got a good mind, Jake. I see these things, these fake things that we do, and I know we're ruining people. It's just like the war. People believe that we're good and the Viet Cong are evil, but can you be sure? Can you be really sure about it?"

Hell, yes, I was sure about it and still am. He had a point about wrestling, okay, but the things the Cong did later on proved that we were the good over there, and when we left, evil won. The war was a complex thing, I know, but at that time, I hadn't looked at all the sides it had; I thought Timmy was a peacefreak badmouthing the U.S., and that didn't sit well with me.

"Don't get me started on the commies, Timmy," I said. "You know I can't stand'em, and if you took a long look at what they believe in, you wouldn't either. Let's talk about the ring. Don't you think it's important that we give people something to believe in? Even if we camp it up, even if we fake it, don't you see we're part of something bigger? That we show people what the world really is? Look, Timmy," and here I got very serious, "I'm a badguy, right?"

"Last time I looked," he said, and he finished his beer.

"Okay," I said, "I'm a badguy, and did you know some of the geeks actually cheer me? God's honest truth. Sure, there aren't many, and you never hear'em over the other geeks, but out there, Timbo, there's people who want to be like me. I am an individual, Timmy; I am my own man as a badguy and there are people out there who know how this works and identify with me."

"Hello, Jean-Paul," he said, real snotty, like I didn't know what he was talking about.

"No," I said. "Hello, Wilhelm Friedrich." I thought I'd beat him at his own highbrow little game, but he just rolled his eyes and ordered another beer.

"Nietzsche you're not, Jake," he said. "And I'm not the white knight. We throw each other around, and anyone with an ounce of brains knows that in the real world a little guy like me couldn't stand up to a bruiser like you. If you were really evil, Jake, and if this were the real world, this wrestling, you'd win, just like real evil sometimes wins. Look at the Nazis."

"Yeah," I said, "and look at the way we kicked their asses. Good won, Timmy. It always does, sooner or later."

This whole question of good and evil must have really been bugging Timmy, because he was really guzzling that Budweiser. He polished off his second beer and ordered another one while I nursed mine.

"Six million jews dead in the Big One, Jake McGurn. Six million, and they never had a chance. How's that for good always winning, eh?"

"Timmy," I said, swirling the brew around in my glass and looking down into it, "I don't deny there's bad in men. I've seen a lot of it,

and in women, too. But however long it takes, however many people suffer, there's a reason for it. It shows us, I dunno, God in history or something. Evil rises up and good kicks it out. That's the thing of it. Without evil, there is no good. Without desperate times, there are no heroes."

"That's my point, that's it exactly," he said, frowning into the suds of his fresh beer. "That's it in a nutshell. There are no heroes. These teeny-boppers wet their panties for me when I bounce up into the ring, but I'm just an average guy; I'm no better or worse than you, but they throw piss on you and hate you, and they love me."

"No heroes, huh, Timmy?" I said, getting hot and downing my beer. The bartender, a fat guy with a walrus moustache, tapped another for me without asking. "Let me tell you about my Uncle Frank." And I told him, but he kept that damn frown on his face and gulped his beer.

When I got done with the story about the kraut sniper and the .45, I looked around and lowered my voice. "And that's why, Timmy," I said, "that's why I carry one myself. Get a load of this." I slid my windbreaker up and scooted my ass around so he could see Freddy under my waistband in the back. "If evil raises its head in front of me, I'll blow its damn brains out."

He snorted. "A gun, eh? Well, I've got nothing against'em, Jake, but they won't solve anything. The real badguys out there have guns, too. Lee Harvey Oswald had one. Every soldier in Hitler's army had one. Every marine in Vietnam has one. What do they prove?"

"This, Timmy. They prove that good doesn't have to buckle under. George Washington had a gun, and so did Sergeant York. So did Jack Ruby, if you want to know. Justice comes out of the barrel of a gun,

justice to rub out the evil that men do."

He got a really pained look on his face. "Spoken like a true fascist," he said, and that tore it.

"Piss on you, Timmy," I said in my meanest voice. "What will you say when the Red Army comes into your house to kick your ass?"

"That's not it at all, Jake," he said. "I have a gun, too, if you must know. I have my dad's .38 and I keep it loaded in my nightstand. Hell, I live in River Rouge, you know? But if we believe in gun justice and good violence, just like in the ring, where does it end? That's not civilization. That's not the rule of law. When violence is a means to an end, it never stops. Never. Case closed."

He sounded more sad than mad, so I softened up a little. "Justice isn't in any court, Timmy. It's not to be found in any lawyer's brain or a dusty book on some stupid judge's shelf. Justice goes beyond all that. It's the biggest thing in the world, Timmy, and we all have a little bit of it in us. We know it when we see it, or when we dish it out."

"I wish I were as sure of that as you are, Jake," he said.

"Believe it, Timmy," I said. I knew the mood of our talk was getting a little too heavy, so I got some change from the barkeep and we played some pool. I beat his ass at that, too.

That was the last time I went anywhere with Timmy. Too much of that heavy talk can warp your brain. Besides, I didn't care for his peacenik bull. That whole conversation ruined the atmosphere of the Cee'em Bar for me, too, and I never went back there on the odd Friday night without remembering what he said. Finally, I quit going there altogether.

My feud with Timmy ended in late May with him throwing me into Doctor Devastation, who'd come into the ring to interfere. I faked unconsciousness and so did Eugene. Timmy went on to become one of the most popular wrestlers on the Big Time and Florida circuits, and guess what? He gave up the game and got a degree in technical writing from Louisiana State, where he got kicked out of grad school for protesting Vietnam. Sam Cohn told me that, and he told me that Timmy later quit a good job with Dow Chemical (believe it or not!) when he found out they made napalm. What a nut!

It was that spring when I finally got to go on the road, traveling with the Big Time civic circuit and, at last, the Mid-Atlantic, playing Romulus, Redford Township, the Lions' Club on Nine-Mile Drive, and all the Rotarian get-togethers off I-75, finally on to Charlotte, Wheeling, Ronkonkoma, Schenectady, you name it. Sure, they were little towns, but I got to know each one like a friend, finding little things like a used book store or a Greek restaurant in an out-of-the-way place that helped me to get used to the travelling life.

Ed and Ida were delighted, naturally, with the fact that their son the TV star was finally going on the road, but to me it was more than fame, more than just a chance to get away from the house where I was still treated like a kid. It was my chance to see what the real world was like. It meant hours and hours on the road, and that was why I was glad when I finally saved up enough that summer to get a beat up '66 Ford pickup, which Ed helped me to fix up and fit out with a jury-rigged camper cover on the back. Passing my driver's exam was no problem after Ed showed me the basics in the Terraplane. When I got my truck and my license, I was free.

My truck was sky-blue where the primer wasn't showing, and when I was in it I was a free agent. Maybe it's different in Detroit than it is in the rest of the world, but there, when you finally get your wheels, you are a man. I used to think of myself as a Travel King, independent and proud, ready to go anywhere on a few dollars of gas and some Porkies pork rinds. That was all I could eat; anything heavier made me sick when I travelled. Except for a couple of early bouts, I drove that truck all up and down the East Coast, practically; I never had an accident, either.

The interior of my camper shell was something to see, too. Ever see the Beverly Hillbillies episode where Jethro fixes up an international playboy pad inside a peanut-shaped Airstream mini-trailer? My camper was a lot like that, but more tasteful. I had a bed made out of a big pad of foam rubber toward the cab-end, and along the walls I had shelves for my books, the complete Conan and the works of Nietzsche. A Polar King cooler kept my beer and sandwiches cold on the road, and it kept my Porkies crisp, too. That camper was like a home to me, and I kept Freddy in the glove compartment to defend it. At night, whether I was on the road or match or in the city where the bout was scheduled, I slept in the camper shell, parking in rest areas or along the sleepy side streets of the towns I passed through.

I was not that close to Sam and the rest of the guys of Destruction Unlimited; my camaraderie with them extended mostly to rough jokes and drinking sprees, combing through the dark bars of second-rate neighborhoods in the towns we played. Outside of the drooping canvas rings and sweaty club-halls we wrestled in, I got a peculiar feeling, the same one I got in the Wyandotte Men's Club. I

couldn't feel like I was a real part of the company, not a gruff and hearty strong man like the other guys or a slick operator like Sam. This made me really uncomfortable, so I usually just stayed in the camper as much as I could when we were on the road.

The times at home with Ed and Ida were better. I was usually away, travelling or grappling, at least five days out of the week, sometimes longer. When I was home, Ida treated me like a king, and Ed made a habit of tuning in the Big Time program every Saturday I was there, watching gleefully as I ruined goodguys like Timmy Tyler or Mack MacKenzie, and criticizing my performance when I lost. Ida usually had a pot roast or steaks ready for us after the show, and she no longer complained when I had a beer with Ed during or after dinner.

Happy Jack had extended his vacation 'til June, when the Mid-South atmosphere became too humid and oppressive even for him. Bear told us all that he'd be back on the second Sunday in June, and so I was the only guy who showed up at the Grayhound station downtown to see him in. Ed dropped me off, and I told him to go on home; I was scared to drive myself in downtown Detroit, and I figured I'd get a ride home from Happy Jack later.

The bus station was very seedy and run-down. Dirt and grime covered the gray tile floor, and the green war surplus seats they had back then were so ripped and rusty that regular people usually didn't sit in them. I lounged against a wall and watched a wino in a faded fatigue jacket try to fight off sleep in one of the lousy seats. No one at the bus station was well-dressed, not like the people at the airports; most of the bus station crowd seemed to be average guys in jeans and work shirts, or women in cheap dresses all the colors of a

secondhand rainbow, clean but poor. I was wearing a nice pair of black chinos and a shiny light-blue polyester shirt, so I felt sort of out-of-place.

Jack came in late on the bus from Baton Rouge. He was taking his brown American Tourister from a harassed-looking teenaged Grayhound employee when I came up behind him.

"Weighing in at 230 pounds, from Terre Haute, Indiana, the undisputed king of pro wrestling, Happy Jack Mulligan!" I called out in my best Lord Layton posh voice, and he turned around to see who the hell it was. What a shock!

Jack was no youngster, sure, but he'd really let himself go down there in Mid-South. There was more gray in his dye-job than ever before, and the wrinkles around his mouth and eyes had cut even deeper into his face, like they were filled with road dirt or something. He looked old, not like I'd ever seen him before, and it scared me.

"Jake!" he said, in a voice that had gotten old like the rest of him. "Jake, my pro-teggy, how are you, you son-of-a-bitch? You got fat while I was gone."

The words were like the Jack I knew, even if nothing else was. "I'm all right, Jack. I got me a name in Big Time and Mid-Atlantic now. I'm Crazy Jake McGurn, the guy who foams at the mouth and kicks ass when the ref's not looking."

"Yeah," said Jack, "I heard you was doing okay from some of the guys that work down through Mid-South. Bruiser Bates showed up for a match with me, and he told me they really hate you up here now. You been puttin' it to the geeks, boy?"

"You know it, Jack," I said. "There ain't no flies on me."

"That's the boy," he said. There was something in his eyes, a cold, hooded dread that made me tongue-tied and stupid with the defeat of it whenever I looked at him.

"Hey, Jack, let's grab a taxi to a good bar somewhere and drink up to your triumphant return here to the Big Time area," I said to him in a fake cheerful voice, and that's what we did. He hardly said a word to me on the way to Irish Mike's, hangout of my youth, and in honor of our last names we ordered Mickey's beer there. Maybe, I thought, good old Saint Mickey's with the green shamrocks on the label like the ones on the neon sign outside would loosen his tongue. Sure enough, it finally did.

"So who's your first return bout with, Jack?" I asked.

"Nobody, Jake." He gave me a sort of shamed look. "I'm giving up the game."

"What?" I yelled. People looked at us.

"That's right, buddy," he said. "I'm getting out. I have done seen the Angel of Death, Jake, and I'm scared." He peered down into his Mickey's like he could see the future in it. "Have you heard of the Avenging Angel?"

I shrugged. "I saw his name on the Mid-Atlantic cards sometimes. They say he doesn't socialize much. I never met him."

"He's nuts, Jake. He's a crazy, insane fool. I been in this game going on thirty years, and I never seen anybody like him."

He paused to drain off his beer with his eyes squinched shut, like it hurt him. I called us up another one.

"He came to Mid-South," Jack said. "I heard stuff about him, but I never seen him either. So he was supposed to wrestle Samson

Martinez. They hate Mexicans down there.

"Anyways, I got it from the other guys that the Angel is unpredictable, see. Goes for the real rough-and-dirty and don't fake it half the time. He supposedly hurt some guys in his time. Martinez wasn't afraid of him, though. He's got balls, I'll give him that.

"Their first match was supposed to be a teaser. Martinez was gonna dirty him up a little, and then the Angel was gonna come back hard and kick his ass out of the ring in no time. Then naturally Jimmy Bugle, that's Martinez' manager, was gonna dirty the Angel in the revenge match to start a feud."

"It didn't go that way. The Angel comes bouncing into the ring and Martinez goes right into him with all he's got, jumpin' the gun like always. He faked an eye gouge, that's what I heard, and the ref says he accidentally did get his pinky into the Angel's eye. What happens then is the Angel comes up like a tornado.

"Nobody expected it. Martinez' head just shot back like a mule kicked him, and the Angel was all over him. Slaps, kicks, bodypunches, you name it. And the bastard didn't pull his punches. When Martinez went down, the Angel jumped up on the top rope and fell on him like a brick.

"Martinez wound up with both arms broke and his ribs sprung. All of'em, Jake, every rib popped. They carried him off in a stretcher. Don Pitts, the promoter down there, had to tell the cops it was all accidental, but we knew better. That son of a bitch was out to kill Martinez."

Jack was looking deep back into the mirror behind the bar. His eyes were actually welling up tears. "We took up a collection,

goodguys and badguys, to take Martinez some flowers and skin mags in the hospital. He was in a body cast, and he kept sayin', 'I can' wipe my ass, man. That maricón busted my arms, and I can' wipe my own damn ass. Chingada.' Stuff like that. Pitts paid the medical bills, but I don't think Martinez is ever gonna grapple again."

"Why didn't you guys kick the Avenging Angel's ass for him?" I asked. This whole tale was giving me the willies.

"Don't think we weren't about to," said Jack. "We looked all over the damn town for him. But nobody knows anything about the guy. Nobody's ever seen him without the mask, and he gets paid cash only. Nobody even knows his name, Jake."

"So this is what's got you, hah?" I asked him, pissed at this Angel guy for depressing Jack. "One nut, and you're gonna quit?"

He shook his head. It came to me then that he wasn't even trying to maintain his dye-job anymore. "No, Jake, that I could handle. But it's what came after that, the thing with Pitts that got me."

"The slick turd knew we was goin' after the Angel. He knew we was gonna wait for the bastard after the next show and ruin him for good. And that Pitts says, 'No, boys, you just leave the Angel alone. He just got a little excited last time. Hell, he's the biggest draw we got on Mid-South.' And he said he'd tell the cops who to look up if anything happened to the Angel. He protected him, Jake, from the cops and from us. And that's why I'm leaving. The game's gone sour."

He'd made up his mind, all right; it was in the way he tossed off his beer and swung around on the stool to face me.

"Boy," he said, almost like he didn't remember my name, "I got you into this. I think maybe I did the wrong thing. There ain't no future

in grappling, Jake. When you get old and slow, nobody loves you any more. They don't cheer as loud. It fades, see, it fades and you hardly know it's goin' until you bounce into the ring one night and it's just the kids out there cheerin' for the goodguy, not you any more.

"Take my advice. Train up for something else. You got a brain, you learn good, you're young still. Grapple 'til you save some dough and do something that don't care if you get old."

Give up the ring? I'd have to be nuts myself to do that. I guess my decision to stay showed on my face as plain as the need to go did on his.

"Okay, Jake," he sighed at me with his beer breath, "okay. But you stay, you keep your ass away from this Angel guy. He goes around lookin' for the biggest badguys, the real famous ones, and he chops 'em down. Martense may make you wrestle him. Let him win fast."

He ruffled my crewcut like Ed used to do. "Don't get yourself hurt, son." He walked off toward the pisser. When he didn't come back after fifteen minutes, I went looking for him. The nauseous-smelling little back room had one urinal and one stool, right out in the middle of the floor. He wasn't there.

I went home alone in a taxi, missing Happy Jack and wanting to get even any way I could with the bastard who took away my first and best friend in the wonderful world of wrestling. I let myself into the house quietly, buzzing from the beer I'd had, and sat down in the old green chair by the window. Light rain had started up, and the cars outside made swishing noises once in a while as they cruised late-night Helen Street. Greenish light came in from the sodium vapor lamp

out-side and reflected off the shining covers of the wrestling fan mags Ed bought. He liked to look me up in the Big Time ratings, where I usually made number seven or six in the Ten Most Hated list. Suddenly it came to me that I might find a picture of my new enemy in the big sloppy pile on the coffee table.

I leafed through a few in the dim light from outside, straining my eyes. In the third magazine, I found a picture of the Avenging Angel in the color section. The caption said he was the most mysterious and most effective goodguy ever to come to the squared circle.

That cold feeling hit me again and shrivelled up my guts.

Guess what? It was the guy who'd been watching me when I first dirtied Happy Jack, the guy in the white mask with the red cross right between the eyes.

The streetlight turned the cross into the rich, deep maroon of fresh blood.

SEVEN

As it turned out, though my fated meeting with the Avenging Angel wasn't to come that soon. Oh, I was upset, sure all through the rest of '68 and early '69. I fought my matches with a new eye to improving my technique, not just in faking it believably, but for speed and effect. I honed my body and my moves so I could fall like a thunderbolt on that white-masked bastard on the dreadful day of judgment.

Happy Jack had gone, and he wasn't coming back. Bear Martense told me shortly after my last meeting with Jack, said the old boy had picked up his last check and residuals from his fictional interviews in the fan mags and left for sunny Florida. I never saw him again.

Except for this new hate, life was pretty much the same for me. I logged miles I don't remember in my Ford, running the east coast with Sam and the boys. I fought lots of goodguys, including some of the last matches Timmy Tyler was in. We had the usual feuds, plenty of one-time-only Texas six-man death matches with all of Destruction Unlimited taking a dirty hand in the fight, Iron Cage Blood Battles with four men on a side tied to the opposing teams with wrist ropes, you name it. It was flashy, it was fun, it was exciting. I got better and better, and I used the Steel Thumb like no one had before. I even took a short course in judo during the summer of '69 at the Wyandotte Men's Club, and Ed and Ida said later that my wrestling had improved so much they couldn't even see my better moves any more, I was that fast.

I still crept off to the Dix Convenience Station, too. Soon I was

sleeping in my camper on those trips not only on a layer of foam rubber, but also on about six inches of comics evenly distributed under the foam. I read them on lazy Saturday mornings in sunny suburbs I barely remember, crunching Porkies' pork rinds while I leafed through the House of Mystery or opened a four-color cover of Treasure Chest. Just like in the ring, good always won in the comics; it was part of the Comics Code.

I had it clear in my mind. Though I was officially a badguy to the geeks, I was really a goodguy in reality; just so, as the Angel was a goodguy in the ring, in real life, he was a badguy, out to spoil the pure nature of the game by making it real. I didn't talk about the whole Angel thing to Ed and Ida, and I'm sure they wondered why I scowled so much and went at my push-ups and sit-ups at home like a madman, grunting and yelling. If I told anybody about my rage, it would lessen the effect; to share my fury would have rendered it impure. I added an inch to my biceps, and my wing muscles bulged out so far behind my armpits that I almost could have flown with them.

Who would have thought, then, that I would fall ass-over teakettle in love with a badgirl wrestler in the spring of '70?

It happened like this. I was at Cobo for a bout with Mack Mackenzie, a perennial enemy of mine. I'd dirtied him many times, once blowing fake fire in his face, using lighter fluid and Zippo from my trunks. That stuff goes right out if you smother it up with your hands and the canvas on the ring floor, so if you close your eyes, you don't get anything except singed hair and sympathy from the geeks. That had been another loser-leaves-town match so he could rotate with the World Championship circuit down in Dallas, and after his winter vacation

there, he was back to kick my ass in March of '70.

Michigan is very nice in the spring, even if most people there don't know it. Everything turns to mud, sure, but the buds come out on the trees and the wind warms up a little and kisses your face like the breath of God. I swear, I've never seen anywhere spring feels so good as in Michigan after a bitch of a winter. I was happy that year; I knew I was on my way to beating the Avenging Angel, I had plenty of comics and candy bars, and I'd just had Freddy's feed ramp throated and polished by a gunsmith in Redford Township so he could handle .45 hollow points. All was right with the world.

MacKenzie kicked my ass, all right. He was a big beefy Hungarian whose real name was Plotz or some such thing, but he went by MacKenzie in the real world, too. His black hair hung down in big greasy curls over his eyes as he pounded my face into the mat; I got up and faked a charge to his blind side but he side-stepped, so I ended up flying out of the ring through the bottom ropes and crashing into Sam. I got counted out unconscious on the concrete floor while the geeks screamed out their joy to see Crazy Jake crash into Mephistopolus. They felt good, I felt good, and the world, like I said, was okay.

It was back in the dressing area that, sweaty and tired, I met Mean Marta. Women and midgets were getting big on the wrestling circuits then (or so we used to say); the geeks, men especially, loved to see well-built women pull each other's hair and scream, and they laughed like hell at the little guys running around like they were real people, goodguys and badguys in HO scale.

I stopped dead when I saw her. I was on my way to the men's room for the inevitable whore-bath, but then she came around the corner

arguing with Bear Martense. She was really worked up, but I honestly can't recall now what she was upset about.

Imagine long, long bare legs in calf-length black boots, legs that end at a leather V that leads up over tits like twin mountains, all topped off by a face that looks like the ghost of a queen, a pale vampire face, but lovely, framed by a wild waterfall of glossy black hair, green eyes like iced jade sparking way above a red mouth, too red to be in such a white, white face.

My mouth hung down to my feet and I grew an instantaneous hard-on of such proportions I thought my trunks would tear.

She walked on by, oblivious, but I was hooked right through the bag. It wasn't just lust, you understand; it was an aura around her, one that radiated the deep secrets of woman, not pure and in no way simple. I had to have her.

These days, it's mostly fat old dykes who get to be evil women wrestlers. I guess women's lib has wrecked wrestling, too, like it has so many things. In those days, my days, a good-looking woman could be good or bad, depending. Modern goodgirls are no great shakes to look at, either, and they're all stupid, too dumb to get a good job or a decent husband. In the late sixties, though, smart, beautiful girls still had to go for crazy professions sometimes just so they could break away into something new. God bless the old morality; it brought me Mean Marta.

I asked Sam to get me a date with her and his eyes went wide. "You, Jacob?" he asked. "Hell, I thought you were a fag. You never went with girls I tried to set you up with before."

"Piss off, Sam," I said, embarrassed. "I don't need whores or

jailbait like you run around with. Just set me up with Marta, that's all I need." I'd cornered him by my cubicle right after I'd seen her; it must have been love at first sight.

Sam evidently got the point. "Okay, Jake, let me see what I can do. I'm no Miles Standish, you know." Hah. He knew every single woman in a twenty-mile radius of Detroit; if he couldn't set me up with her, nobody could.

He went out of the cubicle and I took off for a quick towel-down in the restroom. I was in my street clothes, jeans and a blue Dow Chemical windbreaker when she came in to see me.

She popped in through the tatty beige cotton curtain, sweating and shining from her match. I could smell her sweat and perfume while she sized me up with those icy green eyes, and my balls went cold. I'd had no dates since Nora, remember; I knew nothing about women.

"Are you Jake?" she asked in a voice like claws tearing silk. Good God. I just nodded. "Sam tells me you'd like a date," she said. Her thighs flexed high above the boots.

"Yes, I would if it's okay by you," I stammered out. What a dipshit thing to say.

It's okay by me, tiger," she laughed. "See you at eight." And with a look of feline grace, a smile I'd never seen before, she was gone. Tiger. Good God.

Sam slid in through the curtain a few minutes later. "Meet her here at eight o'clock, north gallery, stud. And if you get lucky, I get a finder's fee." He winked, dashing out to avoid my sweaty trunks, heaved with all my might at his retreating head.

I saw a drug-abuse movie on channel 56 one time. It had a part

about LSD, where everything ran together, colors flashing and sounds all speeded up and muddy. Everything moved really fast and jumped around like water on a hot griddle. That's how the time went that evening as I went home to shower, shave, dress, shave again, and soak myself in Aqua Velva. Ed and Ida were excited by the fact that I was having my first date since Nora.

"Hey, Babe," he said to me, powdered and pomaded as I was in my old blue serge suit, "don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Edward!" said Ida. That evening, for some reason, I remember her wearing some kind of purple pants suit, a real departure for her. "Remember to leave the waiter a tip, Jacob, before you leave the restaurant."

They saw me off, and Ed pinched her ass and kissed her right in front of me as I turned to say goodbye before I was completely out the door. Can you believe it?

Freddy made an uncomfortable bulge and threatened to slide down toward the bottom of my ass under the suit pants' waistband. I had thought about leaving him home, but I was nervous enough about this date without doing something so out of the ordinary as to leave him. That time, too, was one of the few I'd ever trusted myself to drive into downtown Detroit by myself. It was white-knuckle time as I squeezed in and out of the lanes of traffic going toward Cobo, avoiding Corvettes and crazy pimpmobiles and all the other flotsam that drifts in and out of Detroit in the evenings. I was sweating bad when I finally got to the Cobo turnoff and parked on the first floor of the multi-story garage.

I went to the north gallery, feeling out of place in such formal

clothing here in my old stomping grounds. You can bet I panicked when I looked around the north gallery and didn't see her. Was this going to be a flashback to Nora all over again? But no, here she came out of the ladies' room at the far north end, dressed in a slinky black sequined evening gown that put my old suit to shame. She had on lots of eye makeup, and that red red lipstick, but her face was pale like always. She didn't use any makeup to get it that way, either.

"Hi, Jake," she said. "Where are we going?"

"Do you like Mexican food?" Dumbass! What a dumbass thing to say!

"Sure," she said. That was good, because I knew a nice little semi-formal place called Mi Casa out on Telegraph that Jack had taken me to once in a while.

She hooked her arm in mine as we went out the doors at the north end of Cobo, and from that second on, I was in cloudland. My feet never touched the damn ground. There was a bad moment when she saw my pickup, and I wondered if she would think I was a hillbilly or something, but she smiled and climbed into the cab with a hand up from me.

Off to Mi Casa we went. She was never the talkative type, so she didn't say much, not in the cab of my truck or inside the restaurant. It wasn't a big place; it was more like a homey small restaurant, run by a real Mexican couple. It had old cast iron Conquistador weapons mounted on the walls and soft red tablecloths with candles in Carta Blanca bottles set on top of them.

I had the taco dinner, and she had the combination plate with extra hot sauce. She kept looking at me with those eyes of hers, and pretty soon I was talking away about myself, babbling about my

introduction to the ring, the pickle line, from that to Nora, from that to the fact that Marta was my first date since then. Shit, it was like hypnosis. I couldn't stop myself.

She took it all in, stored it away behind those green ice eyes. Then she told me about her own life, still looking at me, sharing her world as she passed the pitcher of honey for the sopapillas in the overheated little restaurant.

"My name is Martha Goldstein," she said. "Yes, that's right, rasslin' fans, I'm Jewish, but not a typical princess like you goyim expect. My mother was Ukranian, and she died when I was five. Some liver thing, I think.

"My father was a putz; I mean it, that's all he was. Every week, a new women. I couldn't tell you all of them."

She dropped her eyes to the tablecloth. "Mama Sophia, Mama Ione, Mama Liz. That's what I had to call them. Every color of the rainbow, eighteen to fifty, anything under two hundred pounds--he didn't care. He got drunk and beat them up. In high school, I got into fights with other girls--and boys--because he was porking their mothers. So when I got out, I got a job with the Body Beautiful salon down in Grosse Point. I showed these flabby old womens how to work out on the machines we had. Fat old butts quivering every day on the belt machine. Hell. So I moved out, just like you, and I got a place of my own in River Rouge. My brothers had already done the same thing, so I figured I'd give it a try. I don't know where the hell they are now; I'm still in River Rouge.

She tore viciously into another sopapilla dripping with honey before she spoke again. "I wanted to be evil because I have a lot of

hate in me. I'm not normal, but it's not my fault. It was Daddy and his whores that did it. So I'm the coldest pussy--you should pardon my French--in the ring today, and I beat the living hell out of those all-American whores they send against me when those moldy old farts like Bear let me win. They don't do it often enough."

Her eyes were shining, shining I tell you, and she looked directly back at me. "You're the first honest guy I've met in this business. I don't know why I said I'd go out with you. I don't like men, especially wrestlers, but you had this thing in your eyes, on your face when I met you, like a little kid. Maybe I thought you weren't mean like the others, I don't know, but when I listen to you, I know you won't hurt me."

"Never," I said. "Not in a million years." Finally, a woman who'd gone through the same stuff I had. Lots of little circuits blew out in my brain. I loved her more and more, a big feeling that boiled up through my guts and turned by brains to mush.

"Let's go, Jacob," she said, wiping her lips with a napkin from the silver dispenser on the table. I paid the check with panache (I love that word!) while she stood at my elbow. Don't think I forgot to tip the waiter, either; I left him five bucks, the biggest tip I ever left in my whole damn life.

I drove her to Bishop Park in Wyandotte. It's beautiful there at night, when you can't see the Kentucky Fried Chicken boxes crushed into the grass and the graffiti on the big rocks by the banks of the Detroit River. Ed and Ida had taken me there when I was a kid. I had a big flat rock all picked out a hundred yards from the parking area. I'd always called it Captain's Rock, because I used to sit on it and

imagine I was a sailor bound for far lands. I told Martha about it and she hugged me close. We kissed, French and all, there in the moonlight. That park's probably overrun with junkies now, but then it was deserted, close and personal in the crisp night air.

"Let's go back to the truck, Jacob," she said, in a breathy voice, and we did. But when I unlocked the passenger door, she pulled me toward the camper.

It was a dream; it had to be. That's what I told myself with the stars flashing down like the ice in her eyes as I unlocked the camper and we crawled inside to the foam rubber mattress with my comics underneath.

I have no real words to describe what we did. Sex, sure, I can say that, but it was stuff I'd never heard or thought of before. When I undressed, she wasn't even scared of Freddy; she accepted him as my defense against the evil world we lived in. The Stroh's I'd had made it seem like a dream come true, and I guess I did all right because that dream-sense helped me to let down a lot of my barriers. She was a virgin, a rare thing then and a rarer one now, but so was I; we did what we could, and if pain was a part of it for both of us, that's life. It went on for centuries, millennia, breaking each other in.

She was quiet again when I drove her home to a shitty apartment house in River Rouge, a dirty gray building with black trim that she seemed ashamed to go home to. We kissed a sticky goodnight and I motored off to Helen Street.

Ed had long since gone to bed, but Ida was snoring in my green chair in front of the snow-filled Zenith screen. In spite of my elaborate quietness, she woke up as I crossed the living room floor to the

hall.

"Did you have a good time, Jacob?" she asked in her old woman voice, making me jump a little.

"You bet, Mom," I said, trying to keep the satisfaction and guilt out of my voice. "She's a nice girl."

"Did you leave a tip like I told you?" This in a drowsy tone like she was going off to sleep again.

"Sure, Mom," I said. "I acted like a gentleman."

"Good," she said, and she rolled over, dressed in her quilted pink housecoat, and drifted off again. I turned off the TV, went down the hall to the bathroom, pissed, and went to bed. It was the greatest night of my life.

EIGHT

So that was the way my affair with Mean Marta, sweet Martha began, and it went on for two glorious years. I can't say we were together every minute, because she had a private side to her that I respected, but we did see a lot of each other. Thank God she didn't get pregnant. I'd kept a couple of Trojans in the back of my wallet since my aborted affair with Nora, and soon I learned to keep a whole box of the damn things in my glove compartment.

I took her home early on to meet Ed and Ida. She played the proper lady while she was there, curbing her occasional cursing and sipping at her beer, not gulping it. Her having beer at all didn't suit Ida too well, but she conceded that Martha was okay. Martha seemed to like them pretty well, too. I took her home that evening with no diddling around in the camper; she didn't seem too eager, and I was more mellow than horny from the Stroh's we'd had.

When I got back to the house, Ida had gone off to bed. Ed was waiting up, an unusual thing for him on his night off; he usually drank himself into a sort of happy stupor and went to bed early.

"Hey, Babe, sit down," he said. He'd taken over my old green chair, so I sat on the faded flowers of the couch, springs and lumps groaning under my ass.

"Son," he said to me, "There are two kinds of women in this world. There's the ones you poke, and the ones you marry. You want to be damn sure you can tell 'em apart. The ones you poke are okay, I got nothing

against 'em. But they'll spread their legs for anybody, Babe. Anybody. So you don't marry 'em, or you'll come home one day and find the milkman or the paperboy poachin' your hunting lease, get me? And the ones you marry do it for you and nobody else. They make you wait, but they're worth it. So be sure what you got, and if you got the right thing, stand up. Be a stand-up guy. If you got the other, just don't get burned. Do you understand, son? I want you to walk like a man."

"Sure, Dad," I said. "No problem. Either way, I can't lose. Know what I'm sayin'?" I gave him a wink to show him I appreciated the man-to-man stuff.

"Great, Babe," he said. "I just want what's best for you." Shit, he looked pitiful when he said that. He was shrivelling up, eating less and less, looking like the solvents from Dow were eating him down to his bones faster and faster. I wondered if my big body and muscles were an insult to him.

We both went off to bed, yawning like bears before hibernation. I never forgot what he told me, but I couldn't square it with how I felt about Martha. She put out, all right, but for me only; every time I was with her, I just wanted to stay beside her forever. She wasn't common property.

She wasn't the marrying kind, either. We'd been going together for about four months, seeing each other after matches and sometimes on the road, when I asked her to marry me.

We were Ypsilanti, playing a Rotary Club card, and she'd spent the night before the match with me in my camper shell. We parked on a quiet residential street by a park at the edge of the city, well out of the way of the other grapplers. They knew we were going together, but

not how serious we were.

Lying there in the streetlight glow coming in through the window louvers, I felt really protective and strong, like a shield between Martha and the garbage of her past. She was fire and ice in the ring, but she was vulnerable when she was alone, kind of lost and scared. She reminded me of the gun molls I saw in movies when I was younger, tough outside but scarred inside. I saw a lot of myself in her; she was like I used to be before I found the ring.

So I asked her to marry me, right there by the park in Ypsilanti. It didn't take as much courage as I thought it would; hell, we acted like we were married anyway.

She raised up a little on her elbow and looked at me. She didn't say anything, not for a long time. My gut twisted--was she going to dump me?

"Not now, Jacob," she said at last. "I can't tie you down with me, and I'm not ready to put myself into something I can't get out of. Jacob, Jacob, get that look off your phiz. Do you think I don't love you?"

"Do you? I asked. Nora's fat, pimply ghost stared in through the window.

"Meshuggina, Jake. That's Yiddish for crazy, and that's the word for you. But let's just keep what we've got for now, and make plans for later later on. Okay?"

She rolled on top of me and I felt better. You have to be grateful for what you've got, right? If we didn't have the name, at least we had the game.

What a game it was! The ring gave me my self-confidence, and then

it gave me my girl. I paid it back by giving it all I had, body, mind, and soul. Soon I had feuds going with major goodguys all up and down the coast, and the geeks booed me like never before. I clawed, I kicked, I fake bit with ketchup in my mouth so it looked like I took chunks out of goodguys' legs and arms.

I really believed Martha felt the same way about the squared circle, too. Sometimes I borrowed Eugene's mask and sat out there among the geeks as the Man of Mystery (if I'd gone as myself, they'd have torn me apart), just to watch her wrestle. Crammed in between the foul-mouthed little kids and the bad-smelling old men in the very back of the floor seats, I watched her demolish Princess Sylvie, Rose Littlefeather, Bobbi May Stevens, and a host of others. Why are good-girls always blonde? Every damn one of them had bright gold hair and usually white tights that rode up their asses sometimes for a moment of great excitement and whistling out there among the geeks.

Martha really was mean in the ring, too, no doubt about it. She specialized in hair-pulls and nail rakes to the face, and in the non-televised bouts on the civic circuit, she did some really vicious tit twists. Some of that stuff was real, too. There were good girls who wouldn't wrestle her because of that. How's that for weird? Her old man was the real scumbag, but she hated women. I'll never understand it. She had never been anything but nice to me, and although she was always aloof with the other wrestlers, she never said anything bad to them. But she hated goodgirls, and she fought them with a purple passion.

I didn't hang out with the other guys as much after I started going with Martha. She didn't like their company, and I didn't care

one way or the other about it, so I saw Eugene and Sam and the Ape Man and all the rest at the bouts and sometimes at a party when Martha wanted to be alone. Sometimes she stayed at home for two or three days at a time, all by herself; I know, because I kept an eye on her apartment house from a parking lot down the street to make sure she really was alone. Sometimes I called her and hung up the phone without talking to make sure she was really there. The long-ago thing with Nora had made me suspicious. Can you blame me?

Together, we indulged in her second-favorite interest after wrestling. We went to concerts. Much to my disgust (which I tried to hide), she was into the fag bands and hard-core rock and roll. In '69, we saw Led Zeppelin, The Crazy World of Arthur Brown (who wasn't too bad), the Grateful Dead (very bad), and, after an afternoon bout in Ann Arbor, the Doors. They were the best of all. I didn't like their anti-war guff, but their music was a lot like the more blues-ish stuff from the early days of rock, not bad at all. "Break on Through" was her favorite by them, and "Roadhouse Blues" was mine. Neither of us liked "The End." I felt out-of-place there with the screaming kids in their torn-up clothes and wilting flowers. They stared at my crew cut and work clothes like I was the freak, not them. But Martha made it all okay, and afterwards she was ready for it, hotter than ever before. Morrison's leather pants must have turned her on. Two days later I had a pair.

She was sort of lukewarm when it came to my interests. We shot Freddy sometimes in secluded woods off Scenic Route 18 and M 33, ventilating beer cans. She seemed to really enjoy that, the buck and kick of the big gun in her little hands. I enjoyed it, too. You'll hear

that .45's are inaccurate; that's not really true. Put a new collet in it and throat out the feed ramp, keep it clean and tighten the rails, and the gun's as good as the shooter. I could nail a beer can end-on at fifty yards.

She didn't laugh at my comics. It was inevitable that she'd find them under the mattress. They didn't do anything for her, though, not even Sheena the Jungle Girl. She liked the pulps a little better, especially some of Robert E. Howard's butch female villains in the Conan stories.

On and on it went. I was happy. I felt more stable than I ever had before. I had a home, I had a career, I had a girl; what more could I ask for? But there's nothing for me to dwell on during those two years, right up to December of '70, nothing at all. It was a big happy blur studded with walks in the park and Thanksgiving together and wild all-nighters after our wrestling bouts were over. I thought it would never end; I didn't want it to. I forgot about the Avenging Angel and my grudge; I got over missing Happy Jack. Sometimes I think the best times in life are the ones hardest to recall, and the painful shit and horror are all you can call back crystal-clear and perfect, agony so real you can't tell if it's live or Memorex.

So I remember December 17, 1970, like it was yesterday. I've always liked to sleep in late, so I was tucked away in my narrow bed at home nice and snug when Ida poked her head in my room and woke me up.

"Phone, Jacob," she said. "Sorry to wake you up, but it's Martha."

I always jumped at Martha's beck and call, and here was a call indeed. She never woke me up early, and I immediately wondered what

was wrong. I stumbled down the hall half-blind with sleep to the phone in the kitchen.

"Jacob?" she said when I picked up the phone, before I could even say hello. "Look, this is hard to explain. You know I'm always bitching about my father, right? He's an old putz, he ruined my life, all that, right? But do you know what the old fool did? He got cancer of the prostate. It's like the hand of God hit him where he lived. So he took off, get this, to Israel. Israel, Jacob, where all the good Jewish doctors go when they can't find a job in New York. I got a postcard from him yesterday. Not to worry, he says, everything is okay, I'm in Beth Aaron Hospital in Tel Aviv, I'll be schtupping the nurses in no time. And would you come to see your old man, he says, your brothers don't answer. I bet he put a father's curse on them. He'll put one on me if I don't go, Jake."

I was jamming gears in my brain trying to connect all this and figure out what she wanted.

"Do you need money to go, Martha?" I asked. "I got some in savings I could let--"

"No, Jacob, the old fart wired me a ticket, reservations at the Tel Aviv Sheraton, the works. He must be blowing his life savings, so I think it's the end for him, Jake. I can't let him go it alone. Do you understand?"

"Sure, honey," I said. "What can I do to help you?"

"Could you give me a ride to Detroit Metro? I want to see you before I leave. My flight's at eleven o'clock."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," I said.

"God bless you, Jacob. I love you." And she hung up, leaving me

standing there in my Fruit of the Looms and staring at the blue-and-white-striped kitchen wallpaper.

"What is it, Jacob?" Ida asked me, her voice sort of tense.

"Martha's old man's got cancer," I said, finally getting my brain going. "She's off to Jewland to see him."

"Jacob, that's not nice. I know Ed uses language like that, but you don't have to. Is her father in a bad way?"

"He's got it in the worst place, Mom," I said. "No way he'll make it." True. When the Big C gets you, you just as well put on your best suit, cross your hands, and close your eyes. There's no way to grapple with it.

"I gotta take her to Metro, Mom," I said, and I got my ass to moving. I took a whore-bath and a quick shave, dabbed on a little Aqua Velva, put on my old blue suit, wishing it was black or something to show Martha I knew (even if I didn't) how she felt. Ida gave me a quick fat hug (damn, but she'd let herself go!) and gave me a peck on the cheek as I went out the door.

"Give her my love, Jacob!" she yelled at me, and I was in my truck and gone. The drive to River Rouge passed in a blur of sooty red brick buildings and dented-in guardrails. What a lousy neighborhood! I always felt sorry for Martha. She was a sweet soul floating on a river of shit, a flower in a garbage dump. I bought her a cheap .22 to carry in her purse right before the damn '68 commie gun law went into effect, so she could drill the bastards on her block if they tried to rape her.

There she was on the sidewalk in front of her apartment house when I rolled up. She was wearing a shiny black fake leather coat down to her knees. I noticed she wasn't wearing any makeup when she got in the

truck, and the cold winter sunshine made her look washed-out and dead. Her eyes were red from where she'd been crying for her father, the man she always called the putz or "the dick that walks like a man." What did she owe him?

"Where's your luggage?" I asked her. I wanted to help her with something, for crying out loud.

"Got none," Jacob, it's just me and a change of underwear. I couldn't pack, not with this on my mind. I got some money, so I'll buy something when I'm there, I guess."

When you drive, you have to keep your eye on the road, especially in the winter with the way these maniacs on the E-ways sail on the salt and snow. Still, I kept flicking my eyes toward her to see how she was doing, taking more chances than I should have, really, the slush and wet on the asphalt rooster-tailing out from my tires.

She wasn't looking to me for anything; she kept her eyes fixed on the crisp blue where the road met the sky. Like always, she didn't say much on the road; I sure wish now she would have.

Detroit Metro Airport isn't as close to Detroit as it is to Romulus and Belleville and all the nice little bedroom communities; the name is misleading. It's a huge place away out beyond Taylor where the jet noise will drive you nuts if you stay very long. The main building is a big, clean place that has all kinds of high-priced crap shops and bars and restaurants to kill time in before you catch a plane. A place like that is just designed to make you feel like a high roller going someplace special so you'll spend more money than you did on your ticket. I always take my own truck when I go somewhere. It takes longer, but I feel like I've earned the trip. That's the only way I

know how to say it.

But I'm just delaying what I've got to say. We parked in a big underground lot just like the one at Cobo and I took her in. It was 10:30 or near as dammit, and we stood there at the El Al counter while she confirmed her reservation with the pretty young Israeli girl behind the counter. She got her ticket and turned back to me, not saying anything, just looking, looking at me with those eyes. There are banks of black plastic chairs bolted into the tile floors all over Metro, and we went over to the ones near the El Al desk.

"This isn't goodbye, Jacob," she said. "Not goodbye. I'll be back for you."

"I know," I said. "Your dad needs you. Hell, bring him back with you. We can all get together, go to Mi Casa, you know?"

She smiled; my damn heart was chunking away like a jack-hammer. "Sure, Jake," She said, "that's just what we'll do." I couldn't shake the idea that I'd never see her again.

She played around with the snaps on her coat. Her ticket peeked out of the pocket over her left tit.

"I never met a guy like you, Jake," she said. Her voice was real soft and her eyes were fixed on that industrial tile. "You were the first for me. A big first. Keep that in mind, okay? Just remember that while I'm gone."

"You were the first for me, too," I said. "I don't want nobody else, nobody but you."

"You and me, Jake," she said. Tears were in her eyes, "Hold me." We stood up and hugged there in Detroit Metro while guys in suits and women in fancy dresses hurried by, and I kissed her there, a kiss I put

all my heart into. I tried to slip her the tongue, but she kept her lips shut and hugged me harder. I patted her on the back; what could I do?

"I gotta catch my plane. Be good, Jacob?" She broke away and walked fast toward the gate area. I just stood there and watched her go.

She turned and looked back at me just once after she passed into the concourse leading to the boarding lounge; there was a last goodbye in her eyes. I waved like a fool and even blew her a kiss. Then she was gone.

I went to the Takeoff Bar on the first floor of the main building and got truly shitfaced on the hard stuff, scotch on the racks, Ed called it. That was one of the few bars I've been in with fluorescent lighting and white marble tables; I wanted a dark place to hide in. I spent every dollar I had on their watered-down liquor in tiny plastic cups with Takeoff Bar printed on them.

When all my money was gone, I lurched out toward the parking lot. It took me ages and ages to find my truck, but it finally appeared right in front of me. I had to use the spare change I'd tossed in my coffee cup holder on the dash to pay my way out of the lot.

I ended up in Romulus, God knows how, parked by their tiny Tourist Information booth in the one park stuck in the middle of town, crying in my parked truck. It had swiftly clouded up, like it does before a good snow; the lead-gray cloud banks swept in like Patton's tanks to dump on the whole state. She was gone, she was gone, and I sat there like a bumbling, incompetent fool, dripping tears on my blue serge suit and bumping my head on the shit-brown steering wheel, drunk and

maudlin. I was alone again.

NINE

She was gone forever, just like I'd guessed. I got letters from her until her father died (They buried him in a tiny cemetery out in the desert under a lone olive tree, Jake.) and then I got letters from some damn kibbutz near the left bank, and finally even those stopped. Not once in any card or letter did she say she loved me. I wonder what happened to her.

I fell into a deep depression, naturally, even worse than the time after Nora. My bouts were lackluster and I was very irritable with Ed and Ida, Sam and the guys, and even the Bear when he told me to shape up or ship out of the Big Time. The guys knew how it was with me; they tried, God bless 'em, to cheer me up. The Ape Man, always quiet, went so far as to give me a gold lame jockstrap and a pair of brass balls on a chain. "You always had 'em, Jake, now you got 'em back," he said, and I had to laugh.

Nothing could pick me up until late July, high summer of '71, when I found out that the Avenging Angel was rotating out of Mid-South to the Big Time.

Sam came up to me in the men's room during my towel-down after a match with Alonzo Hacker, a wimpish goodguy. I was feeling particularly bad because I'd just gotten a really short postcard, a hi-howya-doin' job that turned out to be her last one to me, and I felt all the pain I'd had at leaving her at the airport creeping over me again.

"Jake McGurn, my son, you are in a world of hurt," he said.

I flipped my dirty gray rag of a towel at him and he danced back so I wouldn't wet his cheap black polyester suit. "No shit," I said. "What else is new?"

"I'm not talking about your lost love, dear boy. I am talking big time trouble. The Avenging Angel is rotating with our circuit, and he wants you."

"I stopped dead, dropping the towel to the floor. "No kidding?" I said.

"He told Bear he was at the match you dirtied Jack in. I don't know if you heard of this guy, but he writes his own card. This man is crazy, Jacob. He really believes in the game. He should be a geek, not a grappler. He plays dirty. He'll pick a badguy, a really dirty one, and study, study, study him until he figures the badguy's 'worthy' -- that's his word, 'worthy--of a good pounding. Then he takes him out. Wastes him, Jake. This guy's strong, he's hurt some good men--"

"He's hurt some of the best," I cut him off. "His ass is mine, Sam. I'll take him any way he wants. I got a score to settle." My old determination came back in a flood, popping big stars in my skull and filling my veins with that burning wash of hate, scourging away that weak void Martha had left in me.

"Jake, boobie, this man is gonzo, he's out to lunch, he's--"

"He's meshuggina, Sam, and so am I," I said. "Just get him for me. How long 'til I meet him?"

Sam sighed. "Two weeks, Jake. The bout's supposed to cap the Summer Slugfest."

"Can you get me off next week's card so I can train up?"

"Sure, Jake, sure, but this guy's gonna wind your clock, you hear

me? He's strong, he's fast, he means it, Jacob! I shit you not. This man is trouble."

"So am I," I said, and I gave him my best badguy snarl/smile.

"All right, all right. I've got two crazy men on the card. No wonder they call you Crazy Jake." He'd taken up Tiparillos since the spring; he took one out and lit it up, coughing a little when the smoke got down his throat.

"Take my advice, Jake. Throw this one and throw it fast. This man has really worked some people over."

"I know, Sam. It's his turn now." Good God, I felt fifty pounds lighter; I just about danced down the hall to my cubicle where my street clothes and trusty Freddy waited for me. At last I was going to fight something I could understand, something I could get my big meaty hands on and squeeze 'til it gave. My life had a purpose again.

I had two weeks to get ready. Every day I did fifty sit-ups and fifty push-ups. I ran at top speed around Helen Street, little kids and dogs running to get out of my way.

On Saturday I watched the Angel take the TV title away from the Mangler. Mike gave it up easily, not putting up a real struggle at all, but the Angel was brutally efficient. There was blood in the ring that day, real blood, and I got pretty sick, I have to tell you. Mike got his face scratched up badly, and the Angel danced around the ring with the belt at the end of the match. This was the man who had never been beaten.

During the second week, I doubled my push-ups and sit-ups and figured out my ring strategy. I knew that my only hope was to hit the Angel hard in the first part of the match and not let up until he was

completely done for. I called Bear Martense in the middle of the week and told him I was going to try to win the match; he called me a fool, but he agreed to make it a loser-leaves-town bout, because he said the Angel would never let me get away with beating him if he stayed in town. The Bear called me back that night and said the Angel had agreed to my terms, and that he "looked forward to demolishing the treacherous Jake McGurn." I worked out that night until my sweat flew like rain.

If you work hard at it, you can knock everything out of your brain except for one single idea. I honestly believe that's how to refine and purify the Will to Power until your mind and body merge into a single force, a unit completely dedicated to one goal. My goal was to vanquish the Avenging Angel, and so I lived, breathed, and dreamt of nothing but him in his redcross mask and glittery white tights. He became a devil-doll dancing behind my eyelids twenty-four hours a day. It's hard to explain, but when I really put myself into it, running beyond my limit even when there was a knife in my side and my lungs were on fire, I became him, looking at myself in fear. When I was him, I knew Crazy Jake's purpose was pure; I saw Good and Evil revealed, and I saw which side I was on. When I came back to myself, I cried out loud with delight, because I knew I would win.

The big day came. I was down in the bowels of Cobo, sweating and high on my own adrenalin, a crazy spiral that went up and up until I was floating on my own power. I didn't speak to the other guys when they came to wish me good luck. I think that scared Eugene. His eyes got real big when I stared into them with a big tight grin locked on my face. I bet he thought I was over the rainbow, looney tunes about this match. I was.

Down in my chest, I felt a strong hand around my heart, grabbing and loosening in a painful cycle. Was I scared? You better believe it. It was just exactly the same way I'd felt before the fight with Eddie Dupler. I sat there with that grin etched on my face and my heart thumping until the call came down the hall for the final bout. It was time to kick some ass.

When you're really drunk, sometimes you see everything in slow motion, and when you try to move, you move at that same speed. That happened to me as I went up the stairs and out through the south entrance. Lord Layton's ring announcements sounded so garbled to me that they might have been in some foreign language. There was a capacity crowd of geeks on hand in the chilly air-conditioning; the breeze of cool air and cigarette smoke was like a narcotic after the sweaty dressing area. I vaulted over the top rope in fine form and started to scream out, surprising myself, driving my own head time after time into that soft steel turnbuckle.

The boos from the geeks segued up to cheers as the Angel appeared in blinding white from the north entrance. He moved like a ghost, cat-quick in his white felt knee-boots, moving toward his destiny in that squared circle where I stood like a rock. He also bounced up and in like a dancer and stood in the other corner, quiet, mean.

The bell rang and I lost my mind. I had run this scene through my brain so often during the past two weeks that I thought I'd be able to run through my routine like a robot. It didn't happen like that; I lost control.

This was for real, remember. Usually, badguys wade in during the first few seconds of the match and romp and stomp; then the goodguy

comes back. I hit the Angel like a runaway freight train, with my whole body, and his air went out in a whoosh from his bloodless lips showing through the mask. He shot into the ropes like a bullet and bounced back toward me with his fist balled up.

I looked into his eyes; I shouldn't have. They looked on mine like radar, seas of deep blue I thought I'd drown in, and he hit me in the chest with both fists. My muscles weren't tensed for it, and I heard one of my ribs pop before I felt it. I fell back on my ass and he was on me like a chicken on a june bug.

Ever been busted in the face with a fist like a hammer? Bells ring, lights flash, funny Daffy Duck noises chase around through your head until you feel like you're not there, right there in the ring any more. The only thing I could think of to do was to fall forward and bite him on the leg, right through the tights.

God, what a gross thing! I tasted human flesh and blood right through the thin material of his tights, the solid meaty feel of a living thing torn in my teeth. I took a good chunk out of his calf.

He screamed like a girl and backpedalled to get away from me, falling on his ass for a change. Then, even with the burning ragged pain in my chest and the blood from my head flowing down into my eyes, I was up and at him.

What a slaughter! I slammed my fist into the son of a bitch's jaw hard enough to make his teeth rattle. An eerie keening sound came from behind the mask and his eyes rolled up. He was well-built, give him credit, but I outweighed him by a good thirty pounds and stood a couple of inches higher.

I picked him up and did my first and only real body slam,

wrenching the hell out of my back. He hit the mat with a really heavy thud, but not before one of his flailing arms busted me good on the inner part of my thigh as he went down. He hit the mat with a good meaty whack, like a dead weight almost. Bill Norman was the ref that night, and he was google-eyed with fear, whining at me in his shrill voice to take it easy, not to kill the guy. But this was a no-disqualification match.

I rolled the Angel over on his back. He was almost comatose; his eyes were flickering open and closed and he was twitching all over; blood turned his left boot pink.

I screamed like a banshee and dropped down to my knees, murderously driving my right fist into his chest. It was payback time, and I felt one of his ribs snap like kindling. He went limp, then stiffened up all over. The most horrible babbling sound I've ever heard came from somewhere deep in his chest, a sound like an enraged baboon or something. He tried to stand up and couldn't; instead, he flopped and floundered there in that squared circle, real evil conquered and lying at my feet.

The best of men know when to be moderate; I only gave him a gentle boot in the balls to put him back down on the mat. He was out for the count; I fell on him and Bill Norman slapped three just as fast as he could.

When I stood up, Lord Layton handed me the TV belt and stood back. The geeks were on their feet, screaming, whistling, throwing cups and gravel (how did they get that in there?) and great dirty clots of Coke-soaked ice at me while I tripped and skipped clumsily around the ring, my upper leg numb from the bastard's accidental blow, dancing to

all four corners of the ring, all around the fallen Angel, a secret victory all my own bursting before my eyes like fireworks.

I staggered out of the ring after that. Cobo security men had to surround me just to get me out of there, putting their mud-brown suits and .38's in hip holsters between me and the blood-crazed geeks. There was a hitch in my chest like a spear of ice; I wasn't fifty feet into the dressing area before I collapsed. The scuffed-up industrial tile came up to meet me and a great flood of yellow bile poured out of my slack lips; I heard lots of voices and saw shabby patent leather shoes running around me, and soon there were strong, gentle hands lifting me up onto a stretcher and bearing me away from the arena into the warm summer night. Finally I passed out when they loaded me into the ambulance; but I never, never once let go of that TV title belt with the gold spray paint and the rhinestones that told me I was the Big Time heavyweight Champion, the man who beat the Angel.

I didn't make any money off that match. The two hundred dollar bonus I got went toward my hospital bill. They took me to Royal Oak hospital (a swank place, let me tell you), and the Angel went to Detroit General. Thank God we weren't both in the same emergency room.

General exhaustion and the trauma of broken bone laid me low. I'd worked myself into a frenzy getting ready for the match, and he busted a rib right over my heart; the doctors said if he'd hit a little more toward my sternum, he'd have killed me. That bastard.

Ed and Ida showed up at the intensive care unit after they got the news; they'd long since given up going to every single one of my matches, and they didn't know about my private hatred for the Angel. I was floating on Demerol or codeine or some other shit they'd pumped

into me in the emergency room, so I laughed when Ida asked me if I was okay; she smiled along with me, but the fat planes of her face had gone as white as Cream of Wheat. Ed just looked pissed until I told him how I paid the Angel back; he got a grin out of that and asked me if I remembered all the stuff he taught me back in grade school. You bet I did. It's better to pay back than to receive.

I was in Royal Oak for three days while a whole assortment of old and young and middle-aged doctors in straight white coats poked and twisted my poor bruised body to get my rib set before they gave me some faggy thing like a corset to wear so the rib would heal right. I had a semi-private room with a color TV and flowers from Sam and the guys on a plain white bedside table. I got to use the regular toilet instead of one of those embarrassing bedpans, and my roommate was a comatose old fart with terminal shingles or something who didn't care if I watched Merv Griffin or the Stooges in the afternoons with the volume up loud.

I didn't know how many people cared about me until then. I got get-well cards from Sam and Eugene, the Mangler, that nut Timmy Tyler, and all the wrestlers I knew on more than just a casual basis. Bear Martense even sent me a card with a red-nosed clown on it and a little note inside telling me the Angel was recovering, too; that scumbag was hopping mad, but he was leaving the Big Time just like he'd agreed.

When I got out, Ida had a big white cake waiting for me done up in the Crisco-base frosting she loved; it said Welcome Back Jake on it in greasy green letters she made with some low-budget gel stuff. I was impressed, and I ate a lot of it. Ed had bought a bottle of Southern Comfort for the occasion. "Just the thing for broke bones," he said,

and we drank up, even Ida. They were trying to help me forget that I was out of commission for a while.

That hurt more than the rib and the face and the leg, the fact that I was cut off from the game that was my life. Bear Martense spread the lie to the geeks that I was training for my next opponent and didn't want to relinquish the belt so soon. I watched my buddies, good and bad, sweat out their triumphs and defeats on Saturdays, but all in all, I was out of the game for a long time, 'til mid-September of '71.

Ever see a guy on TV say, "I need time to think?" That's just what I didn't need. Martha haunted me, and so did Nora. Many's the night I took a secret six-pack of Stroh's off to my room and got boozy and maudlin under the dangling model planes, crying quietly for those days gone by and what I could have done. I thought about Timmy Tyler, too, and all the stuff we talked about in the Cee'em Bar. Was I really good?

Holy shit, I thought, I could have made a mistake. I didn't care beans about burning some zipperhead in 'Nam who was trying to kill our guys, but I'd heard some real tiny babies got napalmed; that's not good. I heard, too, that some young kids over there were getting wasted, but they were coming at the U.S. guys with grenades and guns, too, so what was right? What was wrong? Hitler I hated, like any real goodguy does on TV, but I saw a program on channel 56 that said he pulled Germany out of a horrible depression and fixed it so kids weren't starving in the cities any more; he was a badguy, no question, but he had some good effects for a while. Ed said to dump women like Martha after you poke 'em, but I couldn't go along with that, so what

the hell was I supposed to think?

Ideas like that really twisted my brain for about a month before I figured out they were sapping my strength. A man can only be strong on the outside when he really believes he's right on the inside. So maybe everything I thought was true wasn't always the exact right thing to believe; maybe I made some mistakes. I decided to pick my own ideas and stick with them, right or wrong. I believed then and believe now we live in the best country in the world, for all its faults; I believed that the game I was in, pro wrestling with all its silly stuff, was still the right idea to show everybody: that good won, no matter what, even against the worst odds. I felt better then, not like I took a big weight off my mind, but like I put something under it to help keep it up. My mood got better and I watched a lot of TV to take my mind off Martha.

I got back to the game, then, in September, and I quickly lost the TV title to Alonzo Hacker. I didn't care; I knew badguys didn't get to keep the title long. I took it off the real badguy, and that's what counted.

Folks, like I told Jack, there ain't no flies on me; I got back into the swing off it all as fast as you could expect. I had new respect from everyone, even the geeks; they still booed me, and threw cups of piss, and screamed lots of bad names and cuss words at me, but never ever again did they yell any fag curses at me, never did they call me anything again but a rotten, dirty, scumbag man. I dreamt at night of those crazy geeks, seeing their red screaming faces in front of me, impotent, powerless, and I yelled in those dreams "I love you all! You are mine and I am yours!" My fate was tied up with theirs,

and I was a part of their dream they couldn't let go. Things were like they've always been and always will be, right to the end of time.

TEN

Sweating and straining, groaning, twisting my grown-up body into weird positions and crying out in agony or shouting in victory on that sweaty canvas mat took up ten more years of my life, ten long years of beating the pretty young faces of the progressively more wimpish good-guys into that shining turnbuckle or having my own eyes and mouth and crushed-up nose ground into the close-grained floor of that squared circle. It went like a waterfall, time like a jet stream.

I was thirty-five damn years old in '81, happy birthday to me. I'd gotten fat, I admit it; my days at the Wyandotte Men's Club became meaningless, time I could spend with Ed and Ida, both of whom were getting really old. Ed was a pretzel-stick of a man by then, all the piss and vinegar drained out of him by the long years at Dow, his time coming to a close. Ida was a rolling lard-bucket of fubsy happiness; she spent her days watching The \$10,000 Pyramid and dreaming over her money-green little Michigan State Lottery tickets, smiling at her big fat son the wrestler through wrinkles her own fat was slowly smoothing out, a potato of a face, really, but a sweet one.

My days and my music were gone. Saigon fell in '75, the only war we ever really lost, and Happy Days and Sha Na Na (yes, they finally got their own TV show) took the highballin' kick-ass rock and roll I'd always loved and turned it into a dried-out museum piece, a mummy they dug out of a grave, screaming raw power frozen on its lips. Those times can never really be again; the rock-base world I knew was eaten

up by suck-ass disco and sleaze rock. When I listened to the shit they played on W4 in Detroit, old WWWW that used to crank out the real hits in the dead days, I knew I was getting old.

Those years passed like a drunken dream; I never knew what was happening. Of course we went through Watergate and the inevitable takeover of the colleges and news stations by the knee-jerk liberals, but wasn't I still challenging the goodguys like Captain USA, the guy who wrapped himself in the stars and stripes and made the geeks swoon? Weren't the goodguys winning?

Hell, I didn't know. I was in the game, a dream itself, and there nothing ever changes. Pro wrestling, let me tell you, is the one thing in life that stays the same. We had some uproar when the new young goodguys came in, making the circuits play their music over the PA when they came into the ring. The old wrestlers believed that the music stuff was just a gimmick, something to go along with all the rock videos that were just getting started then, a fad that had no place in the tradition of the ring. Sam even talked to me about it one day.

"Why do we have to play all this disco boogie stuff for the Loverboys and the rest of these new tag teams, Jacob?" he said, down there in Cobo's dressing area. They'd finally put in showers. "It does nothing for me. Eugene says the music makes the geeks forget how shrimpy the youngsters are. I believe it."

"Music makes the soul go faster, Sam" I said. "Hell, I may go for it myself. Can you get the Bear to play 'Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On' for that tag match between the Loverboys and me and the Ape Man?"

He rolled his eyes. His goatee, the one he grew back after Cody Earp shaved the old one off in '73, was stone-gray, and most of his

hair was gone. "Do you need that sort of tinsel, Jake? Isn't the game enough for you, or what? This is kid stuff, old friend, I shit you not."

"Just arrange it, Sam," I said. He did. I strutted into the ring after that to my music, and at least that was a little of the world I came from shoved into the geeks' skulls whether they liked it or not.

My days were gone, though, and I knew it. Even if the ring stayed the same, the world didn't, and I kept away from it. My comics, thank God, stayed pure, for the most part. Our Army at War started ending with a little circle down in the right-hand corner of the last panel in each story that said "Make War No More," but the horror comics remained the same. There was one for a while called Blitzkrieg I really enjoyed; it was World War II from German eyes, and even if the lead character was sort of a sissy, he at least showed the Germans for what they were--loyal but misguided. They sure had neat uniforms.

It was 1981, high summer again. We'd gone through the whole hostage thing with a silly peanut farmer farting around trying to slap the badguys' wrists, and then we'd gotten Reagan in; thank God for that. I was doing what I could in the ring to keep the dream going, fighting goodguys like Alonzo Hacker and the Loverboys and Ted Weiss, still another blond goodguy that reminded me of how Happy Jack must have been when he was younger. At thirty-five glorious, infamous years of age, I was fat, winded easily, found some gray hairs in the mornings; no more athletic stuff for me. I relied on the dirty tactics, eye gouges and spitting flames and the Steel Thumb, nothing more than massaging some goodguy's neck with my thumb while he pretended to pass out; you tell me, why is it that the geeks scream for a goodguy to use a thing like

that if he has it, but when an evil wrestler has it, they try to get it banned? Happy Jack was using the same damn thing in '67, and nobody said jack shit to him.

The geeks were getting blood-hungry; after a while, not a match went by but we had to use some Hollywood stuff the Bear got through a mail-order house to ooze and shine like real blood there in the ring. We carried it in plastic packets behind our teeth; we hid tiny squirt-bottles of it in our fists; the goodguys usually wound up bloody but unbowed, the badguys dead out on the canvas and oozing crimson. Jackie Dougall and his fellow announcers ate it up, gloating about "that flowing crimson tide from the head of Jake McGurn" or whatever other poor asshole was out there getting slaughtered in the ring. I bet most of those announcers would have been TV newsmen if they could. Vultures.

It was a scary thing, what wrestling turned into then; the game got too real for some geeks, and I saw some on the Florida circuit carried off by security for fighting out there, not only with fists and feet, but with bottles, too. Real blood flowed outside the ring. On the Big Time, we had to dodge cans and bottles for a while before they started selling drinks in paper cups only. The Bear's nose got redder and more vein-busted as he paid more and more overhead for guards from Brown Security Services to keep the geeks from mobbing us. They spit and clawed from the sidelines; sometimes I was almost afraid to grapple.

I rotated with the Florida circuit, which is a world all by itself, and with good old Mid-Atlantic, but I never took off for Mid-South. Ed had finally retired from Dow in '79 with a three-quarter pension, the year after Fenelli died. Ed kept right on cursing him,

though, but almost in a good-natured way, like he was trying to keep him alive. He once told me that after Fenelli was gone, that dago bastard, Dow just wasn't the same.

I put my wrestling money in the family kitty, and we all did okay. With the money we saved up together, Ed was finally able to retire the old Terraplane and get the car he'd always wanted, a beat-up old '57 Chevy Bel-Air. It was a classic, with a pert little body perched on four bloated whitewalls, fins sticking out at the world and a grill that smiled toothily at everyone passing by.

Ed had his sentimental moments, don't forget; I went with him to Hoot's Salvage to sell off the Terraplane. The seat covers I'd gotten him long ago were sun-faded, and oil leaked out like an old man's piss wherever he parked it. But there was a grieved look on his face as we sold it to greasy old Hoot, an octogenarian in overalls and Nike tennis shoes; we even watched as Hoot drove it out into the classic junker section of the yard in River Rouge and parked it next to a fire-gutted Rambler. That was the end of an era for Ed; he told me as much one day when we were working on the tranny of the Bel-Air.

"Jake boy," he said, "the first time I ever poked your mother, that was in the back seat of that old Terraplane on the way to the motel on our honeymoon. Don't you ever tell her I told you or she'd kill me. Good Christ, I never had a car before that. It was my first, Jake: that's why I hung on to it so long."

"I know what you mean, Dad," I said, and I sure did. "The first is always the best, ain't it?" And I leered at him.

He tried to leer back. God, he was old. Veins had popped all over his face and his nose looked like Bear's; his face was a map of

the years he'd put in.

"Ain't it the truth, son," he said. I was a big boy at last. "Hand me that sprocket wrench."

But fat, flowery Ida wasn't my mother, and Ed, God bless him, wasn't my father. I loved them with a love so fierce it hurt sometimes, but I knew the truth most guys never think of, never have to face: I was alone. I treated 'em the best I could, I never spoke back to those good old people, but I always knew I was my own man, for good and all, for good or bad. I went through changes from '81 on you wouldn't believe.

To start with, I knew I had a brain, but I hadn't used it a whole hell of a lot since I got out of Wayne State. I let it sleep, see; it would have killed me otherwise. In '76 I reread Hamlet, and I thought I'd kill myself before I got done; I identified with poor old Hamlet, a guy who couldn't make up his mind. The only thing was, I couldn't want to make mine up; I went for what I knew. Finally, I figured out that if I came home from school and found out my uncle had killed my dad and married my mom, I would just wade in with good old Freddy, and to hell with the consequences. It wouldn't have made much of a play.

I thought about what was right, too, what was really right. There are so damn many shades of gray in the world today that a guy can't tell the white hats from the black hats, can't make up his mind without some shitty left-wing news commentator telling him how to feel. Did you notice how the news guys kept telling us how wrong we were to be in Vietnam, but never said a mumbling word about Laos after we pulled out, or about the Russians in Afghanistan? Who's right? Who's wrong?

Shit, for three years I went through this stuff. I'm not just

some damn fool who grew up singing "My Country 'Tis of Thee" in school and standing up for the red, white, and blue because he was told to. I looked at the freedom I enjoyed, even with all my problems, the freedom to have Freddy to cold-cock the bastards who might try to hurt me and mine; the freedom Ed and Ida had to live their lives the way they wanted to, working, loving, being the people they were born to be; and yes, even the freedom to show what we wanted in the ring, the triumph of good, the little wimpy heroes against the burly stupid badguys, the same old thing; the right, damn it, to be deliberately wrong if we wanted to. That was what I fought for; that was what I loved.

And it all came down to this: I found out in the spring of '84, after all the shit I'd been through, after my whole career in the ring, trying to be the man the geeks hated so they could have someone to love, losing the only love I'd ever had, I found out, believe it or not, that that shining brown turd, that exemplary asshole the Avenging Angel had romped his way back to the number one position in Mid-South after a long, shadowy semi-retirement. Evil reared its head again, real evil, evil that broke every ring rule I ever knew.

"Jake, boobie," Sam said to me at his apartment during one of his endless parties I'd finally consented to go to, "your old friend is back. The Angel just beat Todd LaRue down in Mid-South. Clean-cut Mister America just diddled Mister Pseudo-Fag in Baton Rouge."

Sam's apartment had lost the day-glow posters in favor of artsy-fartsy 20's advertising posters in frames and a computer on an end table in the corner. I was into Busch by then instead of Stroh's. It was just as cheap and tasted a little better to me.

"What the hell did you say?" I asked, knitting my brow and

frowning in my half-screwed-up concentration. My mean moods were getting worse all the time.

"That son of a bitch, you popped his ribs a long time ago--or did he pop yours? Anyway, it was that time you were in the hospital. It's that schlemiel in the redcross mask. He's back."

Fat, older, not much wiser, I tried to flex my vanished muscles. "Sam," I wheezed out, "Sam, like I said all those years ago, he's mine. His ass is mine."

"Piss on you, Jake," he said, friendly but sloshed himself. "You're getting up there like me, bud. There's no real future in revenge. You've had your big day in the real world, pal. Let it go."

"No way," I said. I'd had a chrome job done on Freddy two weeks before; I was cantankerous and macho-mean. "No way, Mephistopolus, you phony Greek. I kicked this guy's ass once, I'll do it again. I'm going to Mid-South."

Can you believe it? That drunk stuff cut through Sam's boozy happiness like a scalpel.

"Are you nuts, Jacob?" he said. "In this game, or in any game, you're old. There's no way, no way in this world you can bust this guy again. I've seen the tapes. He's in his prime now."

"Once again he's mine," I said. "Can you arrange it, Sam?"

"No, Jake, I don't want nothing to do with it," he said. "You're not getting killed on my say-so. Get yourself another boy." He was scared, honest to God; he was scared of what might happen. I was fat, but I was still good; I'd forgotten more than the Angel would ever know.

"He's mine; you're out of it," I said, and that was it. Even when

I sobered up later, I'd made my promise; I kept my word. In late spring of '84, I took off in my old pickup for Mid-South. I never lie.

Down across the crazy heartland of America I went, deep into the southern world I didn't know. Big signs told me to "Get Right With God!" and Black Draught replaced Ex-Lax in the drugstores I stopped in for my Porkie's pork rinds. I saw grizzle-haired old black men shining shoes and big-bellied white teenage girls with hungry eyes wandering the streets in middle-sized towns I came to. And I wondered, I wondered about all the poverty and evil I saw.

Don't get me wrong; I saw the right stuff, too. There were old ladies who doled out clothes and advice in stuffy blue Salvation Army uniforms on the corners, and teens with earnest, pimply faces who told me I was a fascist when I said at rest areas or city parks I thought the country was getting better, but these same kids helped little children learn to play basketball and chess to keep 'em off the hippie drugs and shit that ate up other teen's minds. Most of these teenaged junior social workers were imported from Massachusetts and other suck-ass liberal states, but they did do some good for the little ones, even if they stuck them with their own mea culpa's and hangups, so again I say, who was right? Who was wrong? I believed in what I did, and I didn't apologize for my life. Piss on 'em. Freddy went with me, and fifty rounds of hardball; I was comforted.

I blew into Baton Rouge in my own style, riding high in the cab of my old Ford pickup, a frugal beat-up blue suitcase full of clothes and shaving stuff behind the seat, my swollen collection of comics underneath the foam mattress in the back. I parked on Foucault Street and down from the Lehrer Boy's Club Auditorium, stronghold of wrestling;

there I slept and ate and sweated in the early summer heat, hot winds off the Gulf coming up to baste me in my tin can home. The first day I parked there, I thought my whole life was a lie, my career one big pile of shit; in that crazy wet heat with mosquitos big as Stukas, I thought my life was all a big fake with nothing behind the fluff. I got in too late to hook up wth Don Pitts at Mid-South, so I had to wander around looking at the local sights and wondering what the hell I was doing there.

Ever been deep down south? The heat'll kill you if the scenery doesn't get to you first. In Michigan, we got nice big pines spaced with fields of crops some dumb farmer's planted out there in the country to try and make a living, a human touch in the big green forests. It's hard to get lost up there. But in the south, trees stick up at the sky like fingers grabbing for the brass ring at the big universal carnival, moss dripping off them like mold from a corpse, little cemeteries that jump up at you with no warning just to tell you you're not here forever.

They bury 'em above ground in Louisiana, you know. The cities aren't much happier, buildings crammed together in silence, gray stores that make you feel really small and old as you pass by their windows covered over with folding anti-crook grillwork that tells you you're not really welcome on the streets after five. A whole new world it was for me, and I wasn't happy to be there. The look of the land and the reason I was there made the whole thing really spooky for me, like one of those trashy movies where the teenagers go off to one remote dipshit town and get killed off one by one by some raving nut. Everybody I saw in Baton Rouge could easily have been a homicidal loony, the town was

that strange.

The next day I connected with Don Pitts in his office at the Boy's Club. He was a mid-sized man with a pot belly and gray-shot black hair he kept greased back with some kind of foul-smelling hair oil. He wore rose-colored sunglasses and had a gap between his two front teeth you could have stuck two dimes in, honest. He wore a hound's-tooth suit gone shiny in the seat and elbows and a pinky ring made like a snake with its tail in its mouth. See what I mean about weird people down there? I know it sounds funny coming from a wrestler, but at least in the Big Time, when we weren't in the ring, we looked normal. Well, almost.

Pitts had a fruity voice like Hubert Humphrey, a kind of self-satisfied, soft groan that was really grotesque coming from a guy who looked like he did.

"Jake, what a wonderful treat," he said. I wanted to vomit. Remember, Jack had let me in on just what kind of guy this Pitts was. "So this time it's you seeking the Angel out instead of the other way around, eh?"

I was in no mood for funny business. "Get on with it, Pitts," I said. "What are the terms?"

He blinked behind the rosy lenses. "Same as all the Angel's matches. No-holds-barred loser-leaves-town grudge match. I don't mind telling you, I've had a hard time getting guys to fight the Angel. You know about him; I don't aim to jerk you around. He's mean, McGurn, meaner since you racked him up in '71. He's never forgot it, either. Now he just tears into whoever we put in against him before they're even ready. Most of our boys just go limp and let him toss 'em around

for a while. He's not too bad when they give in. If you try to resist, though, you're gone. We're gonna have capacity crowds for your return match, and I got the tape of that first bout y'all did. Are you for real again this time? Are you gon' do him good again?"

His voice had started out cool and measured, but he got going faster and faster toward the end of his little speech, losing the six o'clock news type voice he tried hard to pass off as his own. I just stared at him.

"You don't care, do you, Pitts? To you, it's just a chance to see some blood and make money. Hell, yes, I'll kick his ass," and I was steaming mad at this worm, "but I'm gonna do it for myself; I ain't doin' it for the geeks and I ain't doin' it for you. What's my pay?"

His voice was real cold again. "Listen, mister," he said, "I don't know why you're so uppity, but I don't need you, you know. Why don't you just--"

"You do need me," I said, quiet and calm. That tone of voice, if you use it right, will scare people more than all the yelling in the world. "This card with me and the Angel is gonna be your biggest draw of the year, maybe the biggest ever, and you can't let it go. So tell me, and tell me now: what's my pay?"

He dropped his eyes to his hands and started diddling with his pinky ring. I hadn't sounded this way on the phone when I'd called him from Detroit to set up the match; he was confused. "Fifteen hundred plus expenses."

I laughed. "Chicken feed, Pitts; a short piss in a big ocean. I want three-five or I'm going home."

"Three and expenses," he said. "That's as high as I'm gon' go."

His office was just a damp little box full of wilting plants and autographed pictures of wrestlers, and his desk was an olive drab surplus job. I dominated him and the room completely.

"What's the Angel get?" I asked.

"Two-five," he said. "No expenses."

"Get any bets on the match, Donny boy?" I asked. I caught him off guard for a minute, and he looked guilty as hell. I figured Pitts would be running bets on this one match since it was going to be completely real, no fakery at all. This was going to be more than a little waltz around that squared circle.

"That's be illegal, McGurn," he said.

I just smiled and made a gun with my thumb and first finger. I pointed it at him and slowly dropped the thumb. "See you Saturday," I said. "High noon comes at two o'clock in the big ring." He didn't know how to take me. I was out the door and gone before he could say a word.

I went downtown and checked into the Best Western, moving my important stuff out of the camper. I got a cheap single room with a vibro-mattress; after all, Mid-South was footing the bills. It's always nice to have a shower before bedtime.

I went to bed early that Thursday night and got up the next day in time to eat breakfast at the pancake house next door. Those greasy little places go with cheap motels like fungus goes with cowshit, and the food's always the same: everything is fried in last month's oil and the coffee either tastes like colored water or battery acid. I usually have a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich because it's awful hard to screw that one up.

Too many eyes--all sorts of hopeless, greedy pig-eyes stared at me, or so it seemed, while I munched my soggy sandwich. I have a tendency to think people are watching me when I eat, and there in Baton Rouge it was a thousand times worse. The stained white vinyl seat seemed to set off my dark jeans and chambray shirt like a road sign or a target, and the waitress acted like I'd taken off without paying the bill, constantly coming over to my table and asking if I'd like anything else. It was too much; I paid and got out. I went back to my room to get ready.

I wasn't physically capable of repeating my same routine I'd used the last time. I was too far gone in fat and laziness to try that. So instead, I called up our old fight in my mind's eye, trying to remember every detail of what he did and how I countered it.

I couldn't remember it; it was gone in a years-old fog. I was thirty-eight years old, the age when most men have a solid career, a family, a house. I still lived with my parents, I never went out with women, and I played my part in a game that seemed to draw the morally crippled to it like flies to a corpse. I could finally see it, all because of the thing with me and the Angel. To the geeks, he was good and I was bad; to the wrestlers, I was good and he was bad. In the end, we were the same.

Somewhere in Baton Rouge, he was sitting and wondering how to annihilate me; I was sitting in the Best Western a thousand miles from home and wondering how to do the same thing to him. In the ring, the geeks would fade away, the tradition of pro wrestling would vanish, and it would just be me and him, muscle against muscle, and one of us would walk away; the other one wouldn't. I fully believed that the Angel

would do his best to kill me, because in his own head, he really believed in his own goodness, and he sure couldn't pass up the opportunity to take revenge on the only badguy who had ever beaten him. And I would try to kill him because I'd be fighting for my own life, not to protect the other grapplers, not for my memories of Happy Jack and a time when the game was new.

The Angel was younger than me; at least, that's what Sam said. He could very well beat me, even though I was still bigger than him. It came to me there in the Best Western, there on the tatty blue bedspread where I sat staring at the turned-off color TV, that I didn't want to die here, in a strange place, far from home and friends, the few friends I had. I didn't want to kill the Angel, either, poor turd that he was; could he help it if he wasn't normal? I'd be damned if I was about to turn into a Dupler or a Fenelli myself, but that was just what I'd been doing. I'd asked for this one.

I failed socially in high school, I dropped out of college, I quit the only real job I'd ever had, and now, with a little more than half my life behind me, I was about to turn my back on the only thing that had ever made sense to me. All day long I sat in that room, drinking flat tap water out of a white Dixie cup and watching game shows and reruns of old 60's sitcoms on the black-and-white TV, making up my mind about what to do. You know the bit in Hamlet about conscience making us all cowards? That's it in spades. Nietzsche would have been really disappointed in me. I know I was disappointed in myself.

Around six that evening, I went around the corner from the pancake house and found a liquor store. I bought a pint of Southern Comfort and a bag of cracked ice, then went back to my room. I drank that

stuff out of the Dixie cup, too, until it ate up the wax and the cup dissolved around the seams. After that, I drank straight from the bottle. At nine, the liquor was gone and I was crying big hot tears with streamers of snot worming down from my nose. Damn, it's disgusting what your brain and body make you do. I took a cold shower that shocked the fear and sadness out of me a little, and then I cocked and locked Freddy and put him on the gouged pressboard nightstand by the bed.

I nearly overslept. I keep a Little Ben travel clock in my suitcase, but I'd forgot to set the damn thing the night before because of the liquor. It was almost noon when I rubbed the gummy crud out of my eyes and then tried to hold my head on my shoulders with both hands before it fell off. The match was at two.

I've always believed in being prepared, even though the rest of that Boy Scout stuff is for rich kids who can afford the uniforms and the trips. I took a bottle of codeine tablets I had left over from the time I hurt my back wrestling the Von Klyde brothers and popped a couple of them in my mouth, choking them down my poor dry throat. That gave me enough incentive to get up and go to the bathroom to get a drink of water, and from there it was only a short crawl into the shower. I sat shivering and moaning under the cold spray for ages.

It was getting close to bell time when I pulled up in the lot at the Lehrer Boy's Club and killed my pickup in a far corner. That place was jammed with every kind of broken-down rolling stock you can imagine. Rusted-out trucks were the big thing, followed by jacked-up Camaros and Skylarks gone in the chassis from some weird bayou rust or fungus that was eating them from the ground up. I walked toward the

dirty gray sheet-metal building, down the outer row of Galaxie 500's mostly, all of them in colors Detroit never offered, tromping on the kudzu and beer tabs and gritty, rocky dirt on the edge of the lot. I didn't even feel sad, knowing I was about to give it all up; I just felt tired. The hangover had burnt out all of the depression and feelings of repentance and everything else, left me just a big fat aching shell; even Freddy seemed too heavy in my jeans, so I just locked him in the glove compartment before I left.

I went through the back door after I showed my license to the scrawny old security guard. He had rust on his Smith and Wesson, and the holster it was in seemed to have some kind of dry rot; his gray-blue uniform looked like his wife had patched and hemmed it for years. He weighed maybe 110 and looked to be pushing retirement age plus; tell me how a guy like that is supposed to protect the big men from the geeks?

Pitts was running around like a turpented dog, joking with the grapplers (and good God, I didn't know even one of them), slapping asses, lighting cigarettes, and looking at his watch. When he saw me, he rushed over to me all out of breath, eyes jumping behind those pink lenses.

"McGurn," he said, "where the hell you been? We got the first teaser match runnin' in ten minutes. Looky here, boy, I didn't pay you--"

"Damn right you didn't," I said, "but that doesn't matter now. I got something to tell you." It would be the first and last time I'd ever defaulted on a match.

"And I've got something to tell you," he said. He motioned to a

fat guy in a ref suit, who picked up a glittering belt off a metal folding chair and came over to us. There were no cubicles in the back there, and the grapplers were stripping and dressing right there in front of God and everybody, as disgusting a thing as I'd ever seen.

"Here," said Pitts. "Looky here." He was dressed in the same shiny suit he'd had on when I met him. "You now the owner of the Journeyman Heavyweight Belt. Had it made up myself for twenty-seven dollars. We'll say you won you this belt somewhere like Osaka on the international circuit, an' you can make a fuss over it in the ring, say you proud of it and all. You win, you keep it as a precious memory. Angel win, he'll keep it for the same thing. Now how's that, boy?"

"I'm not your boy," I said, and then I had a sweet idea, a beautiful idea, the best I'd ever had. Maybe it would cure the Angel, maybe it would make me a goodguy one last time (but on my own terms, still a getting-there superman), and it would surely put the quietus on this asshole Pitts, paybacks for the whole Happy Jack thing and for trying to cheer me up with a cheap toy before I went into what he knew was nothing but the old meat-grinder. I took the belt.

"Okay, Pitts, where's the bathroom?" I asked. I'd be damned if I'd take off my clothes in front of the other wrestlers.

"It's right down there, Jake my man," said a new voice, a loud, flat monotone. I turned.

There stood a preppy in a nice three-piece black suit, white shirt, red tie, with close-cut black hair and wire-rim glasses. I'd seen his pictures, and I knew he was okay.

"You're Jimmy Bugle, aren't you?" I asked. This was the big bad-guy manager down south, a middle-aged pansy in the ring but a stand-up

guy in real life. I heard he was an accountant before he got into the game.

"In poison," he said. "Don't let old pinkeye there put the shuck on you. Back off, Fairy Queene." And he blustered Pitts back out of my face. Pitts was laughing a little uncertainly, like he knew Bugle meant it but didn't want to let on.

Bugle dropped his ring guff and shook my hand. "I've heard a lot about you, Jake," he said. "I knew Happy Jack when he was last down here, and he told me all about you. I threw fire in his face one time when he met my man Baron Payne. Hell of a nice guy. Jack, I mean."

Talk like this was the last thing I needed. "Sure," I said. "Excuse me." Maybe I'd meant to do what I now planned all along; I'd worn my trunks under my jeans. In the bathroom, I stripped down after I laid the belt across the sink. That sucker was heavy, leather with a big brass buckle and all set with rhinestones. Mere trash. Mere crap-ola.

Back out in the dressing area, there were lockers for the grapplers' street clothes, but I didn't go out to put mine up right away. Instead, I sat in one of the stalls and looked at that damn belt spread across my knees. Pitts didn't know what Journeyman meant, but I did. That belt was like me: cheap, heavy, and trashy. Those moments in the crapper were worse than the ones in the motel; I finally had to get out of there before I started crying.

After that, I sat around by myself in the dressing area. I wondered if the Angel would come in that way, but he hadn't shown when I got the call from Jimmy Bugle to go on.

"You're on next, grizzle-gut," he said. "I've got a surprise for

you."

I went through the chintzy curtains out into the auditorium. Holy shit, I thought, maybe Jack is out there. But that wasn't it. Over the PA system, there came my music, my song for the last time: goodness gracious, great balls of fire.

There were the geeks, row on row from the overhead-lit ring, sitting on olive-drab metal folding chairs under the haze of cigarette smoke, breathing the air full of sweat and cold beer-smell. What Pitts had saved on the cost of the building, he'd used on the auditorium; the inside was painted a brilliant blue, and the ring didn't sag or sway underneath. Even those steel turnbuckles had clean red and blue covers on them. A couple of beefier security guards flanked me, kept the claws and boots of the screaming geeks from me as I approached the ring, carrying the belt over my shoulder.

I jumped up between the ropes and saw a short guy with frizzy hair and a cigarette ready to make the ring announcements.

"Weighing in at 240 pounds, from the city of Detroit, Michigan, the current Journeyman Heavyweight Champion, Crazy Jake McGurn!"

I looked around at the geeks. I didn't shake the ropes, didn't pull my hair, didn't do the Big Stomp. I just breathed the heavy ring aromas, felt the boos rattling my eardrums, looked at the geeks; I saw it all for the last time, and that was bitter indeed. I would miss the excitement, the showmanship, but I wouldn't miss the geeks at all. There they were, unshaven, filthy, in their vinyl cowboy boots and Cat bill caps and yes, I admit it, cheap flower-print dresses, eyes bugging, fists clenched, muscles and teeth out there hungry for the blood of the badman. That I wouldn't miss at all.

"And making his way to the ring, at 231 pounds, the challenger for the Journeyman Heavyweight Title in this no-holds-barred Death Match, from parts unknown, the Mid-South Champion, the Avenging Angel!"

He stalked slowly toward me from the opposite side of the arena, in a shiny white bodysuit done up in silver lame, a well-tended beergut hanging taut behind the cloth. He still wore the redcross mask, but now he walked with a limp. Somebody besides me must have dirtied him in the knee sometime. He came into the ring slowly, oozing in, and I could see his biceps and wing muscles bulging and ready behind his radiant suit.

When he was in the ring, the fat ref I'd seen earlier jumped up from ringside and the frizzy-haired announcer got the hell out. I braced myself for the Angel's attack, but he just stood on the other side of the ring, breathing hard, feet wide apart. He'd learned the value of making the other guy bring the fight to him.

I hadn't put the belt down; I took it off my shoulder and held it in both hands. The ref looked confused, and the geeks quietened down just a bit; most of them expected something dirty, but they didn't know what it would be.

The Angel clenched and unclenched his fists. His eyes hadn't changed; those chunks of frozen blue were like cold lasers locked on my own eyes. The guy was like a snake; he was trying to hypnotize me.

Slowly, with extreme caution in every step, I moved across the ring toward him holding the belt out like a banner. I was halfway across the ring when I let a big smile, a real smile and not my crazy ring-grin, break across my face. For the first time, confusion and hesitation came into the eyes behind the mask; he held his breath.

By that time, even the geeks knew something was wrong. They quieted down for the first time I'd ever heard, really shut up until you could only hear a couple of babies crying. I was walking through molasses, a thick syrup of fear and strangeness. And before I knew it, I was practically toe-to-toe with the Angel.

I held the belt out to him. "Take it," I said. "It's yours. You deserve it."

You can bet he expected some trick. But he carefully reached out a hand and took it. I let my hands hang at my sides, palms forward, meaning no harm. The Angel looked at the belt then, keeping one eye on my hands for any signs of trickery, and stared at the word and the gilt and the rinestones like there was some important message there for him alone.

I'd expected the geeks to cheer, but they were still silent. This sort of thing didn't happen, never, impossible. The fat ref stood with his jaw hanging down, hands absently fumbling with the top rope behind him, uncomprehending. Shit. So that was it.

I turned around and started to walk off, to brave the silent stares of the geeks and the murderous shitstorm I'd take from Don Pitts.

Great stars and flaming pinwheels burst in my skull, riding a metal wind blowing my mind out of my body, overtaken before I even knew what was happening. Titanic forces, blunt and soundless, pummeled my body. Before I slipped into brainless darkness, I thought to myself, death is very relaxing.

I came to in the intensive care unit again, and then I went back to dreamland, off for a long ride through happy lands where chuckling

rivers ran through dark hills. It was nice.

When I came out of it again, I was in a regular hospital room. That loud, abrasive monotone sounded in the hall outside.

"I don't care if he's dead, electric hair, I'm gon' see him. Get out of my way before I send Pecos Bill up here to straighten you out."

Jimmy Bugle came straining into the room past a burly middle-aged nurse with a blonde afro puffing out from under her cap.

"Jimmy," I croaked, "what the hell happened to me?"

"See there, fuzzball? The miraculous power of my presence has done brought him out of his deathly coma. Now get to hell out of here and let us talk. Go clean some bedpans."

"I'm getting security!" she said, and she was gone.

"Jake," Jimmy said, "here's something Pitts sent for you." He dug into the pocket of his plaid leisure jacket and pulled out a check, tossing it on my chest. I picked it up. The numbers swam around, then resolved: \$3,500.

"It's the biggest turnaround Mid-South has ever seen. Too bad you miss it, rockhead; your brain must be cast iron."

He gave me his trademark grin and rapped his knuckles on his forehead.

"What happened, damn you?" I asked, but friendly. That was the only way to get through to Jimmy.

"After you gave the Angel that belt," he said, "he showed you just what belt means. He whacked the shit out of your head with it. Boom. He cold-cocked you. When you went down, he started to shake, rattle, and roll all over your body with the belt until a couple of goodguys, Frank Enlow and Bobby Banks, pulled him off you. You've been out with

a concussion for almost four days now. We thought you were gon' be in a coma." His eyes lost their twinkle behind those wire-rim frames for a second.

I couldn't believe it. "Why?" I asked, and my throat locked up. Jimmy poured me a drink from the plastic pitcher on the bedside table and helped me hold the Dixie cup to get a drink.

"That man is pure-dee crazy," he said. "You knew he believed the wonderful world of wrestling was real. They even found a Superman cape in his car when they impounded it off the lot yesterday. Turns out his real name is Elmo Winkleblack. How about that? His car was stuffed full of comics, too, and all kinds of superhero decoders and magic signal rings and crap he'd saved up since the fifties. I swear he even had a Captain Video secret superspy belt with a flashing buckle like I had when I was a kid.

"So we figure he had himself pegged as the Big Hero, and you were the Big Villain. When you just handed the belt over, you ruined his whole world. You were the only guy he ever lost to, and we all figure he's been waiting for the chance to get his revenge since then. That's why he couldn't let you walk away."

My voice was getting a little better from the sips of water. "What happened to him?" I asked. I felt a shiver go from my back all over my body.

"He couldn't get away with this one," Jimmy said. "I called the cops. He had no right to cold-cock you. They remanded him over to the nuthouse in Gibsland, but you can bet he won't be there long. Everybody in Gibsland is psycho anyway, so they'll think he's normal, and he'll come up on charges. Don says he'll pay a fortune to get him off,

though. And for you--well, the sky's the limit, old fruit."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The geeks got you pegged as a real sportsman now, Jake. You've paid your dues. You're a goodguy again, and that damn damn Angel's a badguy. Don figures we can talk to him, get him to see that in the ring you're a goodguy now, but really you're a badguy, have been all long. Then we add him to my stable, tell him he's really undercover or something, and you move down here a little while. We'll send the tapes to Big Time, too, so you can be a goodguy everywhere. Don'll pay you more than he's ever paid an independent before, straight salary, if you'll let him milk the new feud."

The frizzy-haired nurse came marching in the door again, followed by a squatty-looking black guy with biceps big as Christmas hams under his blue suit.

"That's the one," she said in a grim voice, full of her own importance. The black guy wore a Ruger .357 peeking out of his belt holster. He really didn't need the gun. Without a word, he took Jimmy by the arm and started dragging him away.

"What's your answer, Jake?" Jimmy yelled, talking fast as the black guy pulled him inexorably along, the nurse gloating on the sideline. "Do you want to be Jake McGurn, goodguy?"

I raised my voice as much as I could, even though the effort made my blood sing in my ears.

"My name is Jacob Mueller," I yelled, "and the answer is hell, no!"

EPILOGUE

Two big things happened while I was in the hospital. One, I managed to reconcile myself to a life outside the ring. I promised myself I'd try to do things a regular guy would, maybe even date some girls and get married someday, I don't know. Like Martha said that once, I'm not normal, but it's not my fault. And now I can live with it.

Two, Ida won the Lotto game while I was gone. How about that? I wasted all that time and dough with the Irish Sweepstakes, and Ida plays Lotto one time to break up the monotony of her regular Michigan State Lottery tickets and wins. Two and a half million after taxes. When I got home and told them I was giving up the game, they dropped the news on me. None of us would ever work again if we were careful. A permanent cheap vacation, drives to the north country, and Tiger games in the summers. Our ship had come in, and even if it leaks a little, who cares?

So when I was little, I believed every story should have a moral. Mine doesn't have much of one, but here it is. Here's what I've learned.

Hold on to the little truth in the big lie; remember that payback never ends, but forgiving has a terrible price; and above all, watch, hope, and pray for the forgiveness others may give you, the Big Nod, the cheer the geeks will never give me now, the one that says, "You are a man, no more, no less; you did what you thought was right."

As for me, I think I'll take up fishing.

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